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BEADLE & ADAMS, Publishers, 98 William St., New York.

THE TEXAS HAWKS;

OR,

THE STRANGE DECOY.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, Jr.

NEW YORK:
BEADLE AND ADAMS, PUBLISHERS,
98 WILLIAM STREET.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1872, by
FRANK STARR & CO.,
In the office of the Librarian of Congress, at Washington.

THE TEXAS HAWKS; OR, THE STRANGE DECOY.

CHAPTER I.

THE STRANGE RIDER.

"BAH! for my part, I believe it sheer nonsense—nothing but a hoax."

"So said I until lately; but now I *know* there is something in it."

The sentences just noted were spoken in very dissimilar tones: the first one careless and slightly scoffing—the second low and earnest. Both speakers were young and of prepossessing appearance.

The scene was an attractive one, though somewhat similar ones have been described time and time again. In fact it was the bivouac of a hunting-party.

One glance would decide this. The soiled and blood-stained garments of the half-score figures gathered around the cheerful, crackling fire, in attitudes of careless ease, for the most part with pipe in mouth, the half-picked bones and fragments of meat scattered profusely here and there, telling of a hearty meal just passed by. The horses, rudely hobbled, grazing eagerly hard-by, their sides still wet with sweat; the plentiful supply of rudely-butchered meat that hung suspended from the trees around, mostly of buffalo and deer, all told plainly that this was the bivouac of hunters, resting after a successful day's chase.

In conscious security they had kindled their camp-fire, and now, without a thought of danger, were enjoying that indispensable luxury of a true plainsman—pipes and tobacco.

Though our hunters had not given the matter a thought,

the camp had been pitched in a truly lovely and picturesque spot. At this point two goodly-sized timber-islands extended an arm toward each other, almost meeting. In fact, though the tree-trunks were separated by several yards, their long branches fairly touched, interweaved together, forming a gayly-tinted arch, the frost-touched leaves vying in brilliancy with the colors of the rainbow.

Through and beyond this natural bower, the prairie stretched far away in gently-undulating swells, studded at irregular intervals with timber *mottes*, something similar to those beside which we find our friends. Close to these twin *mottes* was a clear stream of water, a confluent of the Trinity River.

As already incidentally mentioned, the party consisted of half a score of hunters, all young—the eldest scarcely numbering thirty years, while one or two were a third less than that. They were such men as can only be found apart from the great cities, nurtured in the broad West, their limbs and lungs fully developed by the clear, pure atmosphere of the prairies. They would have been out of place in a ladies' drawing-room, because they were at home here. Their hair was worn long; scarcely one of their faces had ever known the touch of a razor, giving their beards a glossy silkiness seldom seen, that even the scorching sun or crinkling winds of winter could not destroy.

"What do you mean by that, Fred?" quickly added the first speaker, Edward Campbell—a tall, stalwart youth, who, despite his few years, had already gained a widely-known reputation from more than one desperate combat with the savages and wild beasts.

"Just what I say, Ned," and Fred Hawksley spoke in a serious tone. "I *know* there is such a being, because I have seen her—yes, and spoken to her, too."

A general movement followed this announcement, and it was plain that the subject under discussion possessed no little interest to the hunters. Still, despite Hawksley's earnestness, they seemed to doubt.

"You have never mentioned this before, Fred. Are you sure there is no mistake?"

"Am I a fool, Ned Campbell?" retorted the young man, coolly. "I tell you that I saw her, only three days ago, not

two miles from this very spot. And I spoke to her, too, as I told you before."

"That's why you were so urgent for us to encamp here, was it?" laughed Ned. "But never mind—tell us all about it now?"

"Yes—who is she? What did she look like? Did she answer you?" eagerly cried several of the little band.

"Well, I'll tell you all I know about it, provided you promise not to make fun of me."

"You're not at another of your sells, are you, Fred? Honest Injun, now."

"No, Ned, I mean just what I say."

"That's enough. Go on. When you talk like that, we know you're not fooling."

"Well, as I said, I saw her three days ago, out just beyond the big red rock; you know where that is. I didn't mention it to any of you, because we had all been deriding Hark Bogan so unmercifully about her, that I was ashamed to tell what I had seen. You may remember that I was unusually quiet, that night, after getting back to camp. I told you I felt tired, but I was *thinking*.

"You know that the red rock is just on the top of a high swell—the highest ground for miles around. I was climbing this—as my nag was tired and heavily loaded with meat—on foot. Mott suddenly raised his head and whickered. Even had there not come a quick reply, that would have told me there was another horse near by, but a neigh *did* come from directly ahead of me.

"I was then almost on the top of the swell, and so could just see the top of the big rock. And there, beside it, *she* was. You know how high the rock is. Well, as she sat her horse, her head was on a level with the highest part of the rock, so you can judge she was no baby.

"I remembered Bogan's description the moment I saw this, and knew that I must be looking upon his 'wild woman.' At first I could only see her head and shoulders. On her head she wore a small cap of some kind of fur, with two or three brightly-dyed eagle-feathers, such as the Kiowas wear. Her dress—what I could see of it—seemed to be made of tanned fawn-skin, trimmed in Indian style.

"I took in this much at a glance, and as it was nearly dark, I naturally thought she was some Indian. I knew that only a woman could wear such hair as that which hung down her back. I even laughed as I thought how crestfallen old Hark would be, when I proved to him that his lovely white phantom was nothing more than some wandering Indian squaw.

"Thinking this I kept on until close to the rock, and not half a dozen lengths from the stranger. Then she lifted a hand and motioned for me to pause. That she meant this, I saw from her turning the muzzle of a light, handsome rifle toward my breast, it resting between the ears of her horse. She seemed like one who had smelled powder before, and I obeyed her.

"Now I could see that she was white—though her complexion was that of a rich brunette. A more beautiful face I never saw. I can't describe it—only that her great big eyes were black and shining as those of a deer; that her figure was the most superbly developed, the most symmetrical that I ever beheld in my life. Boys, that face and figure has haunted me ever since. If that woman is as good and pure as she is beautiful, she would be well worth dying for!" suddenly added Hawksley, puffing vigorously at his extinguished pipe.

"And still better living for—eh, Fred?" and Ned Campbell, laughed. "But go on—you spoke to her—this marvelous beauty?"

"Yes—but not until she spoke first to me. I was still staring at her, amazed, for I knew that she did not live anywhere around here—at least with any one I know, and there's few families in the State that I do not know. She said:

"What is your name?"

"Just that and nothing more. Of course I told her. But that voice! It corresponded perfectly with her face and figure, rich, mellow, voluptuous—just such a voice as I believe Homer endowed the goddess Calypso with, when she was seeking to captivate Ulysses."

"Ha! ha! the invincible conquered—Fred Hawksley in love with the fair unknown!"

"Laugh if you will, Ned Campbell," was the sober reply.

"I half-believe it myself. But as I said, I answered her. She did not speak again, but gave me a look—a glance that set my brain afire—my heart to throbbing like a trip-hammer. Then she touched the rein and shot off to the right, swift as an arrow. At a little distance she paused and raised one hand toward me. I was dumbfounded then, but since I believe that she meant it as a *challenge* to me. I did mount Mott, but jaded as he was, I knew that he stood no chance in a race with that mustang.

"Ned, as I rode slowly toward camp, the strange woman—whoever she may be—fairly rode round me, then with a clear, taunting laugh, gave loose rein and dashed away over the prairie like a bird. In five minutes, she was out of sight. Now you know all that I know about the matter."

"And you chose this camp in hopes of seeing her again?"

"Well, no, not that exactly; and yet I did think of her. If we *do* meet again, I'll find out who she is, if it lies in old Mott's limbs to carry me up to her. There's some mystery about the woman, that I've determined to unravel."

"Give old "buck-skin" a fair show, with plenty of ground before him, and he'll ride over the best mustang that ever scored turf in Texas."

"I believe he can," and Hawksley glanced proudly toward the large, but nobly-shaped yellow horse that munched the grass at the timber's edge.

"Hark!"

There was little need of the exclamation, for all, both human and quadruped, heard the sound that called it forth, the quick, rapid thud of a horse's hoofs upon the solid prairie. All eyes were instantly turned toward the arch before alluded to. The rider—and a trained ear has but little difficulty in deciding whether a galloping horse is riderless—whoever it might be, was beyond the neck of timber, yet evidently approaching the bivouac.

The hunters felt only curiosity, for they knew that only one horseman approached. Then a simultaneous cry broke from their lips. For a moment they appeared awe-stricken.

Sitting a noble-looking mustang beneath the leafy canopy, with form perfectly outlined against the still glowing sky in the west, was none other than the strange being who had

formed the subject of conversation for the past half-hour. Her features were indistinctly visible, but there could be no mistake.

She sat her horse in true savage style: astride, and, with a dress fashioned for that purpose, as was hers, the effect was far from displeasing. Her dress flashed back the firelight in a thousand scintillations, from the beads and silver ornaments that thickly studded its folds. The long black hair, slightly curling at the extremities, floated in wild profusion around her form. A light rifle was carelessly balanced across the deep-seated Mexican saddle. Other weapons gleamed from the belt that encircled her round, compact waist.

"Who and what are you, anyhow?" cried Campbell, breaking the spell with an effort.

The only reply was a low, clear laugh, melodious as the notes of a silver bell. Hawksley had not exaggerated in the least. The most skeptical now acknowledged this, mentally, if not aloud.

"Keep her in sight, Ned," muttered Fred, as he arose. "If Mott can do it, I'll answer that question before I'm an hour older!"

At his movement, the strange rider wheeled her mustang and seemed ready for flight, her face turned, glancing back over her shoulder.

"I can drop the piebald without hurting her," muttered Campbell, half inquiringly.

"No—that would never do. We have no right. Keep her in sight—I think I can overhaul her," and Hawksley uttered a low whistle, at the same time gliding toward where his saddle and bridle hung.

With another clear laugh, the strange rider turned and bending low along the spotted mustang's neck, dashed around the timber. Campbell rushed to the arch, then paused, muttering eagerly:

"Quick, Fred—she's waiting for you!"

Such indeed seemed the case. The woman had only retreated a few hundred yards from the bivouac, and then, as if feeling implicit confidence in the powers of the animal she bestrode, had halted, once more glancing back toward the

camp-fire. Her actions were strange as her appearance. She seemed inviting—challenging pursuit.

In less than a minute from her first appearance, Fred Hawksley sprung upon his noble beast, and dashed through the arch out upon the prairie. The strange rider uttered another laugh, clear and silvery, yet with a taunting cadence that caused the young hunter's blood to tingle and his lips to compress firmly. He resolved to overtake the woman, even if it cost him the noble steed he bestrode.

"We'll follow on after you, Fred," cried Campbell as his friend dashed past him. "Don't be rash—there may be some deviltry in this!"

The strange rider tossed back her floating hair with one hand, as the young borderer sprung into view, then with a peculiar cry, gave her mustang free rein, and sped away over the undulating prairie with the speed of a swallow. And after her thundered the big yellow horse, with the long, swinging stride that Fred knew few mustangs could successfully cope with in any thing over a mile dash.

"Quick, boys—saddle up!" cried Campbell, excitedly. "Never mind the meat. I'm afraid that Fred is running into some trouble—that creature has bewitched him. See! he forgot his rifle—but he has his pistols. Make haste! we mustn't lose sight of them if we can help it, though the moon is full and will soon be up. We can follow their trail, if needs be."

There was little hesitation. Though the day's work had been hard, both men and beasts were ready for a race, and this was no common one. Already the young hunters possessed a burning curiosity to know who and what this strange woman rider really was, and what was the motive of her strange actions.

Hopples were slipped, saddles and bridles quickly adjusted, and then, weapons in hand, the little party dashed swiftly beneath the natural rock, out upon the broad prairie. But where were the two riders—their friend and the strange woman?

For a moment a superstitious thrill agitated the young hunters, but then Campbell laughed. He saw their foolishness.

"They're beyond the swell—we'll see them in a moment. Come on—keep up with me if you can!"

That he spoke the truth, the next moment confirmed. Gliding like shadowy phantoms, rapidly yet noiselessly, two riders appeared near the crest of the second swell, already a mile away. Only that the moon was just rising the eastern swells, the chase would have been invisible to the hunters.

But few more words were spoken on the part of the little band. One and all, they saw that a long and severe race was before them, and that all their attention must be given to their horses, already jaded by their hard day's hunt, if they hoped to keep within view of the young ranger. Up hill and down, over gullies and through the patches of tall grass and weeds, sped the hunters, now no longer in a compact clump, but strung out with intervals of a yard, a horse's length, maybe, between each other. A dozen lengths in front thundered Ned Campbell on his big bay horse.

"Do the best ye can, boys," he shouted back, with bearing on shoulder. "If you can't keep up, follow the trail."

Each of his friends felt the same vague fear that agitated Campbell's heart. They believed that Hawksley was being led into some great peril by this strange rider—that she was acting the part of a *decoy*.

But why? That was beyond them. They did not pause to reason—they jumped at once to the conclusion, preposterous as it seemed.

The moon shone clear and full upon the prairie, lighting up this unique, double chase. First—far ahead, almost invisible in the dim, deceitful light, sped the strange woman rider, the spotted mustang running freely and seemingly at ease. Close behind—in fact not more than a hundred yards, thundered the dark figure of the young ranger, urging on his noble "buck-skin" with both voice and spur. A mile further to the rear was Ned Campbell, his big bay holding its own, if not slowly gaining upon the the two foremost racers. Gradually losing ground, on struggled the others, bringing up the rear.

Bitterly Hawksley regretted having so severely taxed his animal during the day. Were he fresh now, there was little doubt as to how the chase would terminate. The spotted

mustang would speedily be forced to acknowledge its master. But now? With varying hope and fear, Fred urged his horse on. He scarcely knew what to think. At times the spotted creature seemed laboring heavily, at others to be running well within himself. Could it be that this strange woman was *playing* with him? Fred bit his lip and pressed his purs home. With an angry snort, the big horse plunged forward with lightning speed.

Ned Campbell was urging his horse to the utmost, and in his anxiety concerning his friend, he neglected his usual caution, unfortunately for all concerned. Fearing to lose sight of the chase, his gaze was bent ahead, as he gained the crest of a swell.

A loud cheer burst from his lips as he caught sight of his friend, seemingly riding close beside the strange woman. As he turned his head to cheer on his friends, Ned felt his horse suddenly stumble, and then came insensibility.

The big bay horse had stepped into the burrow of a gopher, and stumbling, fell with violence, casting its rider far over its head. Campbell lay like one dead, and forgetting all else in their anxiety regarding his welfare, the young hunters dismounted and crowded round him.

Thus a full half-hour was lost; momentous minutes to their friend Fred Hawksley. Only for that unfortunate stumble, how much that followed might have been spared!

Though considerably bruised, when he returned to consciousness, Campbell found that no bones were broken. Almost his first thought was for his horse. It stood near by, leisurely cropping the grass, in nowise injured by the *contretemps*.

Ned uttered a little exclamation, as he glanced around him. He counted eight forms besides his own. Then he glanced over the prairie in which direction he had last noted his young friend. It was clear and unobstructed. Hawksley and the strange rider had disappeared.

"You ought to have followed on, boys. I fear that Fred is running into some snare. Do you take the trail now. I remember the point where I last saw them. I'll ride on ahead. Don't lose any time, but keep the right track. Fred's life may depend upon it."

Before the last words were spoken, he was in the saddle and away. One quick glance around settled his course, and then fixing his eyes steadily upon a point of timber a mile or more ahead, he dashed on like an arrow fresh from the bow.

His companions followed more deliberately, though at a steady gallop. The moonlight was sufficiently strong to enable them to follow the plainly imprinted trail with little difficulty. In a few minutes they lost sight of Ned Campbell, behind a timber island.

Round a point of this the trail led, and dashing along, the eyes of the pursuers widely dilated as they abruptly drew rein. The prairie here stretched out free of timber, almost level for several miles in either direction. And yet not a living object was to be seen upon its surface !

Was this magic ? More than one of the hunters felt a thrill of superstitious awe, as they glanced at each other. Where were Hawksley and the strange woman ? Where was Ned Campbell ?

“ Look ! ” muttered a tall, lank youth, Zebedee Ruel by name, “ hyar’s thar trail—three critters goin’ at full split. They’ve passed this a-way. Reckon we’d best follow on—what say ? ”

The trail was faint and indistinct at this point, for the ground was harder, ringing sharply beneath the iron-shod hoofs. It was the edge of a tract of prairie sometimes found in Texas—more frequently in Kansas and Nebraska ; composed of sand, gravel and flinty pebbles, over which a horse may pass without leaving a trail.

Such was soon found to be the case here. Though all dismounted, even searching the ground upon hands and knees, the trail was soon lost.

“ Ha ! boys, we’re fools ! ” muttered Craig Fenton, in a tone of disquiet. “ Don’t you know this place ? Why we’re not five miles from Colton’s Ranche ! ”

“ By thunder ! you’re right, Craig,” muttered Ruel. “ Then they must be in the— ”

“ Look yonder ! ”

Following the direction indicated by the outstretched finger, the hunters beheld the tall figure of a horseman, standing

motionless upon the prairie, not two hundred yards from their position. And yet, only a moment before, the prairie had been closely scanned, without a living object being seen.

CHAPTER II.

THE LOTTERY OF DEATH.

OTHER events were occurring upon that same night, that now claim our attention.

A small timber island that stood close beside the stream before spoken of as running near the hunters' bivouac, was the scene of a strange and peculiar trial; one that might with propriety be termed *a lottery of death*.

Shortly after dark a band of horsemen began congregating here, riding silently into the road, dismounting and tethering their animals in a small glade that occupied the center of the *motte*. That they were white men, was plain from the few words spoken, though the overhanging trees concealed their features.

One man who was among the first to arrive, appeared high in authority, judging from the deference with which he was regarded by the others. He seemed ill at ease, or very impatient, moving restlessly to and fro, muttering more than one curse beneath his breath, stamping his foot fiercely or nervously fingering the weapons at his belt.

"How many are there here, Thompson?" he uttered, abruptly pausing beside a tall, muscular frame.

"Seventeen, by my count, Cap'n Jap," replied the man, with the stumpy pipe still clenched betwixt his teeth. "Thar's two more yit—Colton an' Marcks."

"Can it be that he suspects the purpose of our meeting to-night? The soft-headed fool may have seen his brother since then, and as he knows the laws of our band, that would put him on his guard. Let him beware! He'd better cut his own throat than to prove false to us now."

"True es preachin' Cap'n Jap," quoth Thompson. "We'd

sarve him wuss'n we did Hans Koch. But he'll be here, I reckon. He's most al'ays behindhan'."

"Start the fire, Jim. We must have light for the drawing. Ha! there comes some one now!"

"Yas—an' it's *him*, too. He rides the only racker in the band."

"Good!" then adding in a low, rapid tone. "You must watch him close, Thompson. When he learns what is on the boards, he may cut up nasty. Keep close enough to him to grab him if I give the word. You understand?"

"Bet ye—I'll do it, never fear," muttered the man, as he gathered a handful of dried leaves and grass.

"Well, Colton," sternly uttered the man addressed as Captain Jap—his name being Jasper Morton—turning to the last com'r "you are late, as usual."

"I could not help it, Captain Morton. I was kept—"

"No excuses. But if you ever hope to rise higher in the band, you must break yourself of this habit. Only for one thing, you would have been discharged from the league, long ago."

"And that is—"

"We know you would betray us before the week was out. There—you need not deny it. I know you too well. I merely mentioned this now because I believe you need a hint of the kind. You are watched—I tell you that much. You remember Hans Koch? It has not been so long since that you should forget his fate. Take care that we do not have to deal with you in that manner."

"What have I done that you should threaten me in this manner, Captain Morton? Have I ever proved false—haven't I always obeyed orders?"

"There—don't get your back up, Jack Colton. What I say is for your own good. If I am not mistaken you will be tested to-night, more severely than you think. See to it that you do not fail. If you do—you *die*!"

"I don't understand you."

"You will, before long. That will do, Thompson. We only require a little light, and some prying eye might catch the glimmer. Now, men," he added, after a brief pause, "gather round and listen well to what I say. We have work to

do this night—some of you may know what I mean, but most of you do not. Listen well, but keep silence.

“First, a word as to the objects of our league, then as to our laws. It will do no harm to freshen your memory on these points. We all know our calling—our name, for it is *confiscation*—others call it stealing; but that don't matter. Among ourselves we are “Night Hawks.” To others we are simple cattle-drovers, mustangers, or quiet settlers.

“We have been organized some six months. In that time our profits have been nearly two thousand dollars per man: a little better than simple farming. But it will be better still, now that our markets are fairly opened, and a chain established along which we can ship our plunder without chance of being detected. All this, however, you know.

“Now about our laws. The first is—*death to all traitors*. The next—death to those who stubbornly refuse to perform the duty assigned to them. Our motto is, blood for blood. If a member of our league is taken prisoner, we swear to free him, though it cost the lives of half our number. If one is killed, we swear to avenge him.

“You all remember Hans Koch. He warned a friend that we intended cleaning out his corral on a certain night. A trap was set for us, but we escaped it, because a trusted spy discovered Koch's treachery. You know that Koch met his reward. I killed him, because the lot fell to me. Had I refused, your laws would have condemned me, even though I was twice your leader. You wonder why I say all this? I will tell you now.

“You know that Koch's death reduced the number of our league to twenty. There are only eighteen here now. One—Tony Marcks—is absent on duty assigned him by me. The other—Israel Hackett—is dead.”

A low murmur of surprise followed this announcement, and it was evident that few, if any of the band had known of their comrade's fate. Jasper Morton waved his hand for silence, then resumed:

“Yes, Israel Hackett is dead—he was killed last night, while performing his duty. He was one of our best men, and now duty becomes a pleasure—we must avenge him as our laws demand.”

"He shall be avenged—the name? who killed him?" came the fierce cry from more than one pair of lips.

"Keep cool—all in good time, men. We will proceed by rule. It is only one man, and upon one of us the duty falls. We will decide by *the lottery*. It is the fairest way. Thompson—the pouch!"

A small, narrow buck-skin bag was handed the leader, who knelt beside the small fire that flickered faintly and feebly. At a gesture from him the outlaws—for such they undoubtedly were—gathered more closely around, bending forward and watching his every motion.

"You know the rules of this—that a bullet shall be placed in the bag for each and every person present, all but one of them being old and stained by rubbing together—the other one bright and new. Then we draw, one by one, until the bright bullet is chosen. The man who draws that is the one chosen executioner. There can be no refusal—no retreating. It is a sacred command, and the one who refuses to obey proclaims himself a traitor. Do you all understand me?"

"Yes—we are ready!"

"And *you*?" turning abruptly toward the man he had called Jack Colton.

"I vow with the rest—I am ready," came the quiet reply.

"Good! I confess that I had some doubts, for you have acted rather queerly since Koch's death," sneered Morton.

"He was my friend—you can not blame me for feeling touched at his horrible death."

"There is nothing wrong in that—only beware that you do not let your friendship carry you in his footsteps. His wretched fate would be happiness compared with yours, in that case."

Morton seemed to have some secret spite against this member of his band, but Colton commanded himself by an effort of will, and with a scowl the outlaw leader turned once more to the subject in hand.

"Thompson, mold a bullet. your molds run the truest. Make haste."

Five minutes later, all was ready. Jasper Morton took the bullets—one bright as silver, the others all dingy and dark—and slowly dropped them one by one into the buck-skin

pouch, so that all could see. Then he shook them up thoroughly.

"Now, as I call, let each man step forward and draw. You are standing in a circle. I will begin here at my right hand, and go to the left. When you draw, open your hand and hold the bullet in the firelight so that all may see. You first, Wilkins."

The man advanced, plunged his hand into the pouch, withdrew it, holding the pellet of lead where the firelight shone full upon it. It was dark and dingy.

So were the next half-dozen drawn. Some seemed pleased at the result, others indifferent, but one uttered a low curse, as though he had been deprived of a prized boon in not drawing the bright bullet.

Jack Colton came next, and the features of the outlaw chief lighted up with a gleam of malignant joy, as the young man held up the fatal pellet. It was just what he had been longing for. Had he known the meaning of the word, it is probable that he would have prayed for this result.

"You are the elected, Colton," he cried, in a voice that rung with triumph. "*Your* hand must deal the avenging blow! But first—to show that all was conducted fair. See—here are the other bullets. All are dark—you drew the only bright one. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, I am satisfied. I will avenge Hackett, since fate selects me. Tell me the name, and what I must do," quietly replied the young man.

"You must kill him, and before morning. Such are the rules. No unnecessary delay."

"I know—his name?" impatiently.

"Listen. Of course I am very sorry that it has happened as it has. It would have been better had the choice fallen on some other man; but since you *are* elected, you must forget all save that you belong to this league," and as he spoke Morton's eyes gleamed with diabolical joy.

"What do you mean by this?" faltered Colton, his bronzed cheek paling.

"Only to prepare you. Israel Hackett was killed by *your* brother, Henry Colton!"

"My God!" gasped Colton, the terrible truth bursting upon

his heart. "My brother—and I—but no, no! You can not mean that!"

"Thompson, remember what I told you," cried Morton, sharply, shrinking back from before the agitated outlaw, one hand seeking his belt. "Yes, I *do* mean it. Your brother killed Hackett, and he is doomed. *You* took your chance with the rest of us—you must fulfill your oath."

"I will not—I'll kill you first!" screamed the unfortunate young man, and in his frenzy, his revolver was jerked from the sheath at his side.

Now Morton's precautions stood him in good stead. Thompson sprung forward and clutched the half-crazed outlaw, pinning his arms closely to his sides, holding him powerless as a child.

Thus assisted, Morton quickly disarmed Colton, then motioned Thompson to release him. With a hot, angry glance around him, the young man stood still, quelling his emotion by a powerful exertion of will.

"Now let me know just what you mean by this action, Jack Colton. Have you forgotten your oath this soon? Do you intend to defy the league?"

"Yes—when you try to make me soil my hands with the blood of a brother," was the firm reply.

"Ah, you remember the tie now, do you?" sneered Morton. "And yet, only a few weeks since, you swore that you'd have his heart's blood. Have you forgotten that he cursed you, and drove you from his door like a dog, because, as he said, you insulted his wife?"

"He only served me right. I did insult her, but it was when I was drunk. Never mind that now. I tell you that I will not murder him."

"Take care—you are sealing your own doom by these words. You have been told your duty—obey, or take the consequence."

"Let it come. I am ready."

"Durn the fool—what's the use o' palaverin'?" growled Thompson. "Here's the bullets; shake 'em up, an' give *him* a turn."

"For the last time—will you obey?"

"No."

Again the drawing of the death-lottery was gone through, this time even more deliberately than before. Evidently Morton was anxious to put Colton to death, from some reason of his own. During its progress, the attitude of the prisoner—for such he now was—did not change, but his features altered greatly. His resolution seemed dying out as he noted the cool nonchalance with which the lots were drawn. Life appeared more and more dear to him.

“It’s me,” uttered Thompson, with a coarse laugh. “Well, Colton, my boy, since it’s so, reckon I must. How’ll you hev it—lead or steel?”

“Neither. Spare me—do not murder me!” gasped the young man, pale and trembling.

“You know the alternative,” coldly replied Morton. “Do your duty and you are safe.”

“You are not jesting—you mean this?”

“Yes. Strike the blow that avenges Israel Hackett, and we will forget that you refused to do your duty.”

“I will do it. I did not think it was so hard to die; and he *did* treat me mean—like a dog—he even kicked me!” muttered Colton, tremblingly.

Morton’s eye gleamed. This sudden change seemed to please him greatly. Thompson looked on in disgust. He felt only contempt for this pitiful craven.

“Come, we have lost time enough. Mount and let’s be going. We’ll make a clean sweep of the corrals, too, while about it. Thompson, you and I will keep our friend, here, company,” and Morton glanced significantly at his acolyte.

The little band filed forth from the woods, and then set out over the prairie at a rapid gallop—the one gait of Morton’s horsemen. They had only a few miles to travel, and of that they made short work.

Jack Colton rode between Thompson and Morton, his head bowed as though strongly agitated. The outlaw chief was in high spirits. Whatever may have been his object, he was greatly pleased with the course affairs had that night taken.

“Yonder’s the ranche,” muttered Thompson, slackening his pace. “Now, what’s the programme, old man?”

“Well, our first care is to see that Colton, here, does his duty. Either you or I can go with him to the door, just to

keep his courage up, you know ; the other can take charge of the men and go through the stables and corral."

"Jest as you say, Cap'n Jap. But how'd we best work it—bu'st in an' take the critter by s'prise, or knock 'im up?"

"Best rap at the door. He'll think it's all right when he hears Jack's voice. And as for you, my man," addressing Colton, "remember that your life depends upon how you act this night. Thompson, you will keep him covered with your pistol, and at the first sign of treachery, drop him. You hear me?"

"Yas—I'll do it, too, so mind yer eye, ole boy," and the tall ruffian uttered an oath to bind his threat.

"You waste a great many words. I have to do this deed, and I will do it. Why do you threaten so much?" quietly added Colton.

"Because I don't half-trust you. I believe you are a traitor at heart, and I am half-sorry that I gave you another chance at the grove. But take care! You'd better have been born dead than to attempt any treachery toward us now. While one of the band lives, your life will be in peril."

"His will may be good a-plenty, but he hain't got the sand in his craw to act the traitor. But never fret, Cap'n Jap. I'll see that he puts Hen Colton out o' the way, or down he goes hisself. Come, we'd better git down here. The houn's begin to smell us a'ready."

The entire party now dismounted, securing their animals to the rude rail fence, at this point being hidden from the house by the long hay-topped stables. After a few whispered instructions from Jasper Morton, Thompson linked his arm in that of Colton, and glided silently toward the house.

As they crossed the stile-blocks, a furious barking broke the air, and half a dozen large hounds came rushing toward them. Thompson cocked his pistol, as he muttered in Colton's ear :

"Quiet 'em, Jack—still the brutes, or you'll never live to make love to Hen's widow!"

"Should you harm me, those brutes would tear you to pieces before you could fire twice," coolly replied Colton.

"See—they know me."

The huge hounds had recognized the hand that had so often

led them in days gone by, and their angry greeting turned to one of joy. With difficulty Colton kept them from leaping upon his body in a swarm, licking his hands and face.

Thompson uttered an oath. The baying of the hounds had aroused the inmates of the building, for a faint light shone through the heavily shuttered windows.

"Wal, it don't matter much, a'ter all. We won't hev to knock so long. But now mind how ye act, Jack Colton. You see—I nev my shooter cocked an' ready. The fus crooked step you make—down goes your apple-cart! Onderstand?"

"Yes. But suppose he refuses to open the door?"

"He won't if you play it fine. You tell him to open; thet you're hard hit—bin in a muss at the Corners. I'll sw'ar to it. Thet'll fetch him, sure. So—kinder lean on me. It'll look better an' 'll hide your barker from him until he comes out. Keep cool now, and mind your eye, for your life depends on your doing this job slick an' without any bunglin'."

"All right. You hail him. I'm hurt too bad to call so loud," added Colton, with a sickly laugh.

"Hellow—the house! You Hen Colton—I say—*durn* it all, man be ye deaf?", roared Thompson, supporting the young man upon one strong arm.

"What's wanting out there?" demanded a clear, strong voice from the interior.

"You're wanted—got a sick man here thet needs a little doctorin'. Some kin o' your'n, I reckon. Says he's your brother."

"What's that?" and the heavy door was cautiously swung ajar a few inches.

"It's me, Henry," and the young man's voice trembled.

"What's the matter with you?" the settler demanded, a trace of suspicion in his tones.

"Nothin' much—only cut up a little. *Monte* Pete an' One-eyed Johnny doubled teams on him, down to the Corners. They're subjects for a fust-class wake, an' the lad here is hurt consid'able. He would hev me fetch him here—said he wanted to make it up 'th you, or somethin' like that. But I reckon he's wuth two dead critters yit," hastily explained the tall outlaw.

"It's true, Henry. Give me shelter for one night, or until my hurts can be looked to. You will?"

"Of course—you are my brother still, though you had acted twice as bad as you have done. Come—let me help you."

The settler, unsuspecting treachery, stepped out upon the porch, his countenance expressing his anxiety. Then Thompson nudged Jack Colton with his elbow, as he loosened his hold.

What followed was quick as thought. A bright flash—a sharp report—a death-cry of intense agony—a heavy fall upon the broad stone steps.

Then Colton, still clutching the smoking pistol, sprung forward and seizing his brother pushed him forcibly back into the building, in a moment closing the heavy oaken door and dropping the stout bars into place.

Inside the brothers—outside, what? A writhing, bleeding body from which the life was rapidly ebbing. Thompson the outlaw had been outwitted, and paid the penalty with his life!

As he gave Colton the signal that the time had come for his bloody deed, the young man turned his pistol against his breast and fired. With bullet-pierced breast, the outlaw fell, dying.

Henry Colton was thunderstruck. At first he believed that the assault was upon him, but when his brother closed and barred the door, with that horrible groaning outside, an inkling of the truth flashed upon his mind.

"What is this—what do you mean, Jack?" he gasped, bewildered.

"It means that I have saved your life, Henry, for the present. But come—is the house well secured? We'll have a desperate fight on our hands before many minutes."

"Yes—all is secure. But explain—I don't understand. You are not hurt—that man lied?"

"No, I am well. That was part of a plot. But first—out with the light, then go and tell your wife that you are safe. Tell her that there is no real danger, for we can easily beat them off until day, and they'll not dare stay longer, for fear of the neighbors. Go now—then hasten back here."

Henry Colton followed his brother's advice, for he heard his affrighted wife calling his name in anxious tones from the upper half-story, that answered for sleeping apartments. A true woman of the border, she felt safe on seeing him unhurt, and stilling the child, she hastily dressed and followed her husband to the lower floor.

"Mary, this is no place for you," murmured Henry as she glided to his side. "Go and stay with Tommy. There may be danger here."

"No more to me than to you, Henry. I can load your weapons for you, if you have not time. No—I will not go. Tommy is safe up stairs, and my place is here beside you."

"Let her stay, Henry. It will show me what I have to make amends for. Mary," added Jack, his voice sounding husky, "while I have time, let me pray your forgiveness. I was drunk and half crazy, or I would have known better than to have insulted you. You will try and forget my words?"

"Yes—and we will be true brother and sister after this. You can not guess how deeply it hurt me, knowing that I had caused hard feelings between you and Henry."

"He was right—it was my fault. But I'll make amends, if my life is spared."

His brother understood this last remark though Mary did not, for Jack had, in a few hasty words, told him all. How, when driven from his home by his only brother, he had fallen into the tempter's snare, and become one of Jasper Morton's "Night Hawks." He told him too of the death-doom sworn by the outlaws, and that while one of the Night Hawks lived, neither would be safe from danger. It was this thought that clouded both their brows.

Henry Colton marveled greatly that no attack had been made, though full quarter of an hour had elapsed since the fall of Thompson, but a word from Jack explained this. The Night Hawks, busy plundering the stables and corral, no doubt fancied that the death-cry proceeded from the settler, and that the chosen executioner had done his work well. But they would soon discover the truth, and then—

"Ha! it's coming now!" muttered Jack Colton, in a low, strained tone, as a peculiar whistle came faintly to their ears. "That's Morton's signal to Thompson."

"Stand in this corner, Mary, out of range. We must show the devils no mercy now, and remember that the more we lay out to-night, the less we will have to fight in the future," sternly added the settler.

"If the moon only shone brighter!" muttered Jack, his eyes gleaming viciously. "I'd give my left hand for a fair shot at that devil, Morton!"

"I know him now. If he's wise, he'll keep out of range. Look! yonder they come!"

The rifles of the brothers clicked ominously, and then two dark muzzles protruded slightly from the small loop-holes. The house had been built with an eye to defense against the Indians though until now the settler had been unmolested. The outlaw whom he had shot, he detected riding off on a valuable stallion, the day before, and at his rifle's crack, Israel Hackett fell dead. Horse-stealing was regarded as an even more heinous crime than murder, in those days.

Jasper Morton had chuckled fiendishly, as he heard the shot and death-cry. He believed that his plans had been successfully carried out. But he became uneasy at the long delay of his acolyte, and gave the signal as stated. No answer coming, he began to suspect the truth, and mustering his men, was now approaching the dark and silent building.

"When you are sure of your aim, Jack," muttered Colton, "tell me."

"I'm ready now."

"Then—fire!"

Two whiplike reports rung out upon the clear night air, sounding almost like one. Two of the Night Hawks fell to the ground, writhing in their death-agonies. Wild cries broke from the survivors, and with one accord they broke and fled, seeking the nearest cover, for the moment completely demoralized.

The brothers laughed, and quickly reloaded their weapons. But Mary seemed greatly agitated. As Henry noted her pale and frightened face, she murmured

"What if they fire the house!"

"My God! I did not think of that!" gasped Colton.

CHAPTER III.

THE MIDNIGHT CONFLICT.

A STRANGE fear filled the breast of the young hunter, Ned Campbell, as he dashed away over the prairie, his eyes riveted upon the point where he had last seen his friend in hot pursuit of the weird rider. And yet, had he attempted, he could not have given expression to this dread, in words.

Something seemed to tell him that Fred Hawksley was running blindfold into a deadly peril—the more to be dreaded because unknown. That this strange woman was acting the part of a *decoy*.

All the rumors that he had ever heard of her, now flashed across his mind. Until this night he had treated them with contempt, believing them mere fabrications, or else finding birth in a superstitious imagination.

For six months past, that portion of Texas in and around the "Corners," had been filled with wild rumors and stories in which a strange woman rider played a prominent part. In one thing all coincided, that the woman was young and bewilderingly lovely. In all else, the accounts differed.

One day she was seen here—the next there, miles and miles away. Now she rode a spotted mustang of great beauty and fleetness; again a black—then a bright bay. Full twenty men, both young and old, solemnly affirmed that they had chased her, some upon horses famed for speed and endurance, but all declared that she had distanced them with seeming ease. None had ever gotten within speaking distance of her, until now Fred Hawksley declared that he had heard her voice.

Where she lived, no one could tell. Certainly not in any house in the county, for close search had been made by more than one border youth whose impressible heart had been fired by the strange beauty. When seen, she was ever alone. All in all she was an enigma—and until now, Campbell had believed her a myth.

Aside from his personal friendship for Fred, another inducement spurred Ned on. Rumor had it that the handsome hunter had surrendered his heart to fair Fannie Hawksley, Fred's sister, and for once the owner was correct.

When they set forth upon their hunt, Fannie laughingly bade him take good care of Fred, though there was an undercurrent of seriousness in her tones that Ned understood. He knew that Hawksley was rash and adventurous, even to foolhardiness when his blood was fairly aroused, and he had promised her to take care that he returned all right.

He remembered his promise now, and it spurred him on, that and his faintly-defined presentiment of evil. Should any thing serious happen to Fred, how could he face Fannie?

"Around that point I must catch sight of him," he muttered, as he urged on his good horse. "Unless I mistake, I can see the prairie for ten miles from there, and surely I was not insensible long enough for them to cross that stretch? And once in sight, I can guard him against danger."

The big bay horse covered the ground, with long, deer-like bounds that swiftly lessened the distance. Though laboring heavily—for full fifteen miles had been traversed since leaving the bivouac, in addition to a long day's travel—the noble brute did not falter. He would continue his stride until his great heart burst, as Ned well knew. But this was no time to consider the welfare of a horse, when the safety, perhaps the life of a dear friend hung in the balance.

With eagerly straining gaze, the young hunter gained and rounded the point of timber. A cry of wonder broke from his dry lips, and he abruptly drew rein. Not a living soul was to be seen, though the prairie stretched out before him, smooth and level almost as a ballroom floor.

Where could his friend have gone? Surely not straight on, across that tract? Impossible—it was fully ten miles, if an inch. Around the *motte*? No—for the trail led straight forward, as a glance showed him.

Then a sudden cry broke from Campbell's lips, and he cast a rapid glance around. He saw that the moonlight had deceived him—that he was at least a mile further west than he

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had believed. All was plain to him now—the mystery was a mystery no longer.

“The *baranca*—they are there—it must be so! But how—my God! can that woman have been a *spirit*?”

The ranger reeled in his saddle. The strange events of that night had unmanned him, and wild fancies took possession of his brain. He half believed that this strange rider was nothing but a delusion—a phantom who had lured his young friend on to his death, by a fall down the *baranca* that, though still invisible, he well knew lay before him at only a few yards' distance.

His mind a strange medley, Campbell urged his horse forward, and in half a dozen more bounds, stood upon the verge of the *baranca*; a deep, narrow ravine, with almost perpendicular sides, the bottom thickly strewn with jagged boulders of different sizes. Though this ravine began less than a mile to the south, Ned knew that it ran north for ten times that distance, preserving the same general direction, though winding and tortuous.

Still sitting his horse he peered eagerly down into the *baranca*. The full moon behind him only lighted up a portion of the further side. The bottom was wrapped in darkness so deep that from where he stood, the eye could not penetrate it.

A strange awe was upon the young ranger. All that was superstitious in his nature was now fully awakened. It seemed more than an adventure with common flesh and blood.

Twice his lips parted to utter his friend's name, and as often he refrained, why, he could not himself tell. He peered down into the darkness, his horse slowly trotting along the escarpment, toward the north.

Suddenly Campbell gave vent to a cry. Close before him seemed a narrow pathway leading down into the ravine.

He urged his horse forward, and descended below the level of the prairie. But a very few moments convinced him that even if he could descend to the bottom, he could do little good without lights, and turning he scrambled once more to the level ground.

He saw that his comrades had come up, and were now

standing as if amazed. His was the figure that drew the cry of astonishment from Craig Fenton.

"Quick, boys," cried Campbell, riding toward them, "dismount and get something for torches. They must be down there—but whether dead or alive, God only knows!"

"You think that she—" began Fenton, in a low, hushed voice.

"I don't know—I'm afraid to think. But don't talk—make haste. We must search the ravine."

The woods were near, and the young hunters well knew what to select for torches. In a very few minutes they were back to the edge of the *baranca*, where Ned Campbell had already kindled a light with his flint and steel.

Bearing the feebly-flickering torches, the party descended into the *baranca* by the path that, though rough, was amply wide. They slowly advanced along the rough, rock-strewn bottom, holding aloft their torches, expecting with each movement to come upon the dead and mangled form of their young friend.

The flaring lights caused the shadows to dance and move weirdly, and a dozen times in as many minutes, their hearts were set in a wild, sickening shudder as one of their number believed he beheld the object of their quest. But as often the mistake was proved.

The search was continued in silence. None cared to speak. The same superstitious feeling was upon all. All in all, the night was one not soon to be forgotten.

They had carefully searched the *baranca* upon both sides of the spot for which the trail had pointed, and yet nothing was discovered. They interchanged glances. Could it be that the chase had turned and skirted the ravine? Campbell answered the thought, positively.

"Not unless they entered the timber. It runs for nearly three miles, and this gully for a good ten. I should have seen them. No, you may laugh, but I believe they are somewhere in this ravine. We know now that he did not ride into it, here. But you know Fred. He don't know what fear is. If that woman rode into this—and further up there are a dozen places where it could be done, if one was only acquainted with the ground—he followed her. He could

never quit the chase until he caught her or—she turned into air !”

“ Well, what shall we do ? Fire a volley to let him know we’re looking for him ?” asked Fenton.

“ No—not yet. I can’t tell you why, but somehow it strikes me that there is mischief in this. Why did she wait there until he was ready to chase her ? She must have seen what we were by the fire-light. Then, if friendly, why run at all ? I believe it’s a decoy of the Kiowas—you know they are getting saucy again. If so, they are still in here, or else we would have seen them as they rode away. Put out the lights and we will explore the place. They can’t be far away.”

After some objections this plan was adopted, and the party, with ready weapons, explored the ravine for full half a mile. Then their progress was stopped by a barrier of huge bowlders, over which a footman could scarcely clamber in noonday, much less a horse and rider.

“ It’s no use,” muttered Fenton, disgustedly. “ We can do nothing here in the dark. Besides, I believe that they must have turned round the timber, instead of coming into this hole. In my opinion we’ve all been acting like a pack of natural born fools !”

“ The fust sensible words I’ve heerd sence leavin’ camp,” uttered another.

“ You may be right. I hope so, anyhow. We can go up and see if the trail comes out again into soft ground, as it must if they went into the wood.”

“ First, give him a salute. He *may* be in here, hunting for the girl, if she hid from him. It can do no harm, and may do good. If alive and within hearing, Fred’ll answer.”

The rifles were discharged, one quickly succeeding the other, and then all listened breathlessly. Minute after minute passed by, without any reply. Campbell drew a long breath.

“ Well, let’s go. If he *is* in here, he will not mind a little delay—for he must be dead !”

Slowly the little party retraced their steps and emerged from the *baranca*. Mounting their horses they rode slowly off along the edge of the flinty ground, scattered at regular

intervals from that to the trees, in order that, should one overlook the trail, another might find it.

The hopes that had been roused by Fenton's suggestion grew fainter with each rod passed over. And when the end of the timber island was reached, full three miles from where the trail was lost, the hunters reined in their horses, their heads drooping in despair. That hope—seemingly the last—was banished.

“What shall we do now?”

“What *can* we do?” and Campbell's voice sounded strained and husky.

“I hev it!” cried Ruel. “The dorgs—we kin trail him 'th them!”

“That's so—why didn't we think of it before?”

“We can try—but I haven't much hope,” gloomily added Campbell. “You know how we rode around—we must have covered the trail.”

“But we can *try*—don't be so craven, Ned. It's not like you to gi' up so easy.”

“I know it—but something tells me that Fred is lost—if not dead, that we will never see him again. Why, I don't know. I never felt so before to-night. Boys,” and his voice sunk to a whisper, “I believe that was a—a *spirit* that poor Fred chased!”

No one answered, and they rode on in silence. The true born and raised Westerner, is naturally superstitious. It seems inherent with them. Though some may deny this, I *know* it to be truth.

“Wal, I don't know as Colton's dogs kin trail a *sperit*, but I know that truer varmints don't live. Ef *they* cain't find Fred, then he *is* gone—shore!”

“Ha! listen—you hear that?”

Campbell's voice trembled with excitement.

Two muffled reports came roaring over the prairie, unmistakably that of firearms. All heard them, and for a moment, believed that it was Hawksley signaling to them. But then Ruel—the keenest ear, by far, among them—cried:

“Ef it's Fred, he's at Colton's. Them shots kem from *thar*.”

"He'd hardly have gone there—and if he did, why would he fire?"

"He wouldn't—'tain't him. Boys—you hear *me*; thar's trouble thar!" muttered Ruel, as several more reports—sounding confused as though fired in an irregular volley—came faintly to their ears.

"That's so—ride now, boys; never mind the horses. There's more at stake than their lives!" gritted Campbell, for the moment forgetting the strange disappearance of his friend, in the knowledge that others were threatened.

But there is a limit to animal endurance, and though better horses were never bestrode than those of the young hunters, they galloped heavily and laboriously. That day and night had been too much for them.

Though loving their noble beasts, the young rangers now plied their spurs mercilessly. As Ruel had said, there was trouble ahead. With voice and rowel they urged the failing animals on, their hearts beating rapidly with the fear of being too late. And the horses, true to the core, plunged on, less and less rapidly.

"Ha—look!"

Campbell it was that spoke, but the gesture of his outstretched hand was unheeded. All eyes beheld the same object, and easily interpreted its meaning.

Sweeping round a timber island, a thrilling sight burst upon their gaze. A bright glare was rapidly ascending to the heavens, spreading and growing more and more vivid with each moment. One glance told them the meaning of this. A house was burning—the house of their friend and neighbor, Henry Colton!

That this was result of no accident, was equally plain, for gain there broke forth the significant crash of firearms. It meant murder and rapine.

"We must make it, boys, whether it kills the horses or not!" gritted Campbell. "One more dash, and we'll do—*now*!"

With the words, spurs were plunged rowel deep into the already deeply scored sides of the tortured beasts, and with wild snorts of pain and terror, they dashed madly toward the brilliant light. Holding their breaths, the young hunters

handled their weapons and prepared for the result. The half-mile was lessened to one-half that—a third, and still the animals thunder on.

A stumble—an almost human groan of agony, and one horse is down, the hot life-blood spurting from his mouth and nostrils. It is that of Ruel. The tall hunter was prepared for this. He felt the noble brute's sides collapse, and with a nimble spring, alighted softly upon his feet.

“Good—hurry up, Ruel,” cried Campbell, who had witnessed the act.

“Bet ye—I’ll be thar!” and the hunter bounded forward like a deer.

It may seem strange that the Night Hawks take no alarm at this approach, but they did not. The prairie-grass was thick, the turf moist and springy; the burning building roared and crackled loudly, and they were all intent upon watching the doors, knowing that the inmates must soon emerge or else die a horrible death in the flames.

They had not long to wait. Those within were not men to die tamely, while a chance remained to deal a blow at their enemy. To stay within was certain death. To come out seemed equally hopeless, yet they chose this alternative.

The front door was flung wide and two forms sprung out into the open air, with cocked and leveled rifles. A rattling volley was fired at them, but their movements were so quick, their change of position so abrupt, that most of the missiles went wide of the mark.

One fell to his knees—it was Henry Colton. A wild shriek was added to the tumult, and Mary, his wife, who had been forced to remain behind while the men drew the fire of the Night Hawks, sprung out, her little boy clasped to her breast, and flung herself beside the wounded settler.

Colton seemed invigorated by her presence and once more sprung erect, his rifle echoing the death-knell of an outlaw. Then a wild cry broke from his lips as he sunk back. He caught sight of the rescuers.

A hoarse cheer—a deadly volley—then the young hunters sprung from their trembling animals, and with drawn pistols, rushed to close quarters. But the Night Hawks did not tarry to test their metal.

As a band they were annihilated. Two-thirds of their number had fallen, what with the fire of the besieged and this withering volley, discharged as they all rushed forward to complete their murderous work. With cries of terror the survivors turned and fled for their horses, followed by a rapid discharge of pistol-bullets.

Jack Colton had escaped the storm of bullets that saluted their bold dash from the blazing building, and recognizing his now deadly enemy, Jasper Morton, the Night-Hawk chief, had fired at him. The outlaw staggered, but did not fall, and he was one of the few that gained their horses.

With a curse of rage Colton dashed aside his useless rifle and sprung after Morton. There was reason in his action, for he knew that his life would be in peril as long as the outlaw lived.

Twice he fired, but without apparent effect. The Night-Hawk leader sprung into a saddle, then urged his horse to rapid flight. Colton promptly imitated this action, and the two, pursued and pursuer, soon disappeared without the line of light shed by the blazing dwelling.

"Look to these devils, Ruel," hurriedly uttered Campbell, as he looked around upon the scene. "If any are living bind them. We'll have a hanging bee here to-morrow!"

"Oh, Ned!" sobbed Mrs. Colton, "come to Henry—quick! He's dying!"

"No—he's only hurt a little, not much. He'll be all right in a minute or two," soothingly uttered Campbell, though far from being so confident in his heart. "How is it, Colton, old fellow?"

The settler smiled faintly, then murmured his wife's name. She was beside him in a moment, and then, with her hand clasped in his, he swooned.

"Now, Mary," uttered Ned, as firmly as he could, "be strong—nerve yourself, for on you may depend Henry's life. If you take on this way it'll kill him, sure."

"I will—I'll be calm. But is there hope—he is not dead?"

"Pooh! far from it. You'll not be a widow for many a long year yet, my dear sister. It's only loss of blood, with the excitement, you see."

While he spoke, Campbell was carefully examining Col-

ton's wound, and to his great joy, found that he had told the truth, unknowingly. Only one bullet had struck him, severing a minor artery in the left thigh, causing a profuse flow of blood, but nothing that rest and quiet would not cure.

"What d' y' think, Ned?" muttered Ruel, his face black with suppressed anger, "What d' y' think them imps hev done?"

"What?" demanded Campbell, alarmed.

"Shot them dorgs—every one, dead es a nit!"

"Is that all? You startled me half to death!"

"All—*all*? Them dorgs—the best in Texas—truer'n death—oh thunder!" spluttered Ruel.

"Never mind 'em—are there any horses around besides ours?"

"Yes—them what was rid by those car'on."

"The boys must ride further, then. We must rouse the neighbors. Colton and his wife need care, and then we must hunt down the villains that escaped. Besides, there's Fred—he must be found."

With a grieved look at the carcasses of his favorite "dorgs," Ruel strode off to set the hunters at work. An hour later the wounded man and his wife were on the way to shelter, and Ruel was leading the hunt after those who had killed his dogs.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BARANCA MYSTERY.

It was a bitter blow to the Night-Hawk leader, Jasper Morton, to see his long-worked-for revenge thus snatched from his very grasp, just as the game seemed entirely in his own hands. Long-worked-for, we say, for the reader must have seen that his was no common enmity toward the two brothers; why, may be explained hereafter.

Morton recognized the rescuing party, and knew that all was lost. Few among that picked band but would have been a good match for him single-handed, even before he received the wound that well-nigh disabled his left shoulder

With a bitter curse at his ill luck, the outlaw sprung upon his horse, and plunging spurs viciously into its ribs, dashed off in rapid flight. Three others imitated his example; either from chance or a hope that the young hunters would not separate, each outlaw chose a separate course, riding for dear life.

As we have seen, Jack Colton marked his enemy, and followed in hot pursuit upon one of the horses that the Night Hawks had left fastened to the rail fence in the rear of the stables. Then began another mad, headlong race, the third one that had crossed the prairie that night.

The moon still shone brightly, and Colton could plainly distinguish his quarry, save when a ridge intervened for a moment. The distance separating them was not more than two hundred yards, at the most, and to his fierce joy, Colton saw that this was gradually being lessened, and while urging on his excited horse, he assured himself that his pistols were in readiness for use.

"Stop! Jasper Morton—coward!" he cried, in a voice that trembled with rage and hatred. "Stop and prove your manhood—it is only one man that chases you."

The Night Hawk turned and glanced over his shoulder, but instead of checking his madly racing steed, he bent lower in the saddle and urged him to a greater speed. Colton fairly howled aloud in his rage as he saw the outlaw slowly but surely creeping away from him, and drawing a knife, he thrust its keen point several times into the hips of his horse.

Snorting wildly, the tortured brute sprung forward with a speed that seemed to rival that of the lightning's bolt, and Colton laughed aloud as he raised his revolver. Another score moments and he felt that he would be within range.

Then his pistol cracked, deliberately, at regular intervals. His nerves were like iron now, and he felt that revenge was his, at last.

But the moonlight was deceitful, the motion of his horse unsteady, and the bullets hissed harmlessly by the fugitive. A bitter curse broke from his lips as he emptied the first revolver.

Thrusting it into his belt, he again made use of the cruel spur. With wild, killing bounds, the tortured animal brought his merciless rider nearer his foe.

Again Colton leveled a pistol—his second revolver. At its sharp report, the horse bestrode by the Night-Hawk leader gave a sudden bound, that told the bullet had found its mark.

The pursuer laughed aloud, and leveled his weapon once more. The pursued uttered a fierce despairing curse and turning in his saddle, fired three shots in quick succession at his relentless pursuer.

Fortune favored him in the result, for though scarcely pausing for aim, one missile foiled Colton's hopes. With a shrill scream of pain, the noble brute stumbled and fell, casting the settler headlong to the ground. A bullet had struck its fore-leg, that already overtasked, gave way, causing the heavy fall.

Morton heard the fall, and glancing back, uttered an exultant laugh. For a moment he pressed hard upon the bit, as though he would return to contemplate his triumph, but then, altering his mind, he spurred on.

He was well-nigh disabled, and did not know how many or close were his pursuers. He was in no condition for a fight, just then. His wound, freely bleeding, already caused him to feel faint, his head beginning to swim dizzily.

Added to this he felt his horse weaken and act as though failing. For a moment he wondered at this, for it was his own animal, a proved good one, but then he divined the cause. One or more of the settler's bullets had found their mark.

With hard-drawn breath and gritting teeth the outlaw glanced over his shoulder. To his joy the prairie was clear of pursuers. Then Colton had been alone!

The horse twitched his tail, and his ears drooped. Morton knew what these symptoms meant, and he prepared for the result. Drawing hard upon the reins, he slackened his speed. It was time. The poor brute was trembling convulsively, the blood oozing from its nostrils and hanging lip.

Morton sprung to the ground, with a fierce curse. The horse staggered when relieved from his weight, and gave a faint whicker as it turned its head toward its master. But that was all. With an almost human groan it fell forward, dead.

"Curse the luck!" snarled Morton, wincing with pain as he moved his left arm. "Just now when I most need him—wounded, too! Them devils will be upon my track by day—

light—and where can I go? In the *motte*? They'd unearth me there. Ha! I have it—I can hide in the *baranca*—at least until I can pick up strength to go further. There's a thousand holes among the rocks that I can hide in; unless they try hounds," and he started at the thought, for he knew that in such a case, he was indeed lost.

Still Morton knew that the *baranca* afforded him the best chance of eluding the search that he knew would be made for him, if only by Jack Colton, as the rocks would leave no sign for human eyes to trace him out by. His horse had carried him to within half a mile of the ravine, and though feeling weak and faint, he set out at his best pace for the refuge, not daring to stop even long enough to dress his wound.

He little dreamed of the adventure that was to befall him there, else he might have hesitated before choosing the *baranca* in preference to the woods.

A few minutes carried the Night-Hawk chief to the edge of the *baranca*, and then he hastened along the verge, seeking for a spot down which he might clamber without too severely exerting his wounded arm. A mutter of satisfaction greeted his success, and Morton cautiously groped his way along a winding trail that evidently led down to the bottom.

He, even then, noticed that this trail had been used, but that gave him no uneasiness. So too had a score of paths at as many different points, by both human and beast.

The trail led him toward the southern extremity of the *baranca*, and on reaching the bottom, he naturally continued on in that direction. For some time he sought among the huge, thick-lying bowlders for a snug covert, without finding any that satisfied him.

Before him loomed up the rocky barricade that had checked the progress of the young hunters while engaged in their search for Fred Hawksley, earlier on that same night. Morton, however, had reached the opposite side, facing the north, instead of south.

Among this pile of bowlders Morton hoped to find a secure refuge, and had almost gained its foot when a low cry broke from his lips, and he abruptly paused, crouching down to the ground, one hand clutching a revolver-butt. A strange object had caught his gaze—doubly strange in that place.

"Was it only fancy?" he muttered, peering curiously forward. "I don't see it now—it's gone! And yet I don't think it was a fire-fly. Ha!"

While muttering these words the outlaw slowly rose erect until he assumed his former position. The exclamation told that he had again caught sight of the object.

This was a small point of light, clear and brilliant, glowing steadily and unchangeably. As he slowly raised his head, Morton saw that this only shone from a small aperture, for beyond a certain point, in either direction, it was invisible.

For a time the Night-Hawk chief forgot his bodily pain and exhaustion in wonder. There was something strange in this light, shining from that lone and wild spot, that he resolved to investigate.

Keeping his eye riveted upon the star-like point, he slowly and cautiously advanced, with almost every step losing sight of the light, but then recovering it again. In this manner he gained the lower boulders, and it seemed now that he could reach the light by simply outstretching his hand. Instinctively he raised an arm, then laughed faintly at his own credulity.

Cautiously Morton climbed further among the rocks, his eyes still fixed upon the light. A fragment crumbled beneath his hand, and he fell forward, striking his head with violence upon the rock.

The shock and pain wrung a slight cry from his lips, and the pistol slipped from his grasp, clattering sharply upon the stones, fortunately not exploding. Quickly recovering himself, Morton glanced forward; but the light was gone!

The blow upon the head confused him, or he might easily have avoided what followed. Instead of retreating or concealing himself, as prudence would have dictated, he remained perched upon the boulders, endeavoring to discover the light.

A faint metallic clink caught his ear, and quickly following the sound, his eyes seemed to outline, though dimly and indistinct, the figure of a human being among the rocks. Only the one brief glimpse was afforded him, for a blinding flash filled his eyes—a stinging pain shot through his brain, and

with a wild cry, he flung aloft his arms, falling backward to the ground.

When he recovered consciousness, the outlaw captain found himself lying upon a soft couch, evidently formed of skins, for his hand clutched some hairy substance. A heavy throbbing pain filled his brain, and his wounded shoulder ached horribly.

With a half-conscious groan he raised a hand to his head. It touched a sticky substance that he knew was clotted gore. Then it was not all fancy—there had been a human form standing before him, and the blinding blaze came from a pistol or rifle that had wounded him.

“So you have come to,” uttered a deep voice, coming from above or behind Morton’s head.

He started to a sitting posture and uttered a cry of terror as his hand sought his belt, only to find it weaponless. A low, taunting laugh followed this movement, then the voice added, as footsteps moved toward the outlaw :

“You need have no fear, my dear sir ; you are safe here, for the present, at least.”

Morton turned his head, and by the dim light saw a tall figure standing beside him—the figure of an old man with close-cropped hair and smooth-shaven face. As he gazed, he knew that this was the man who had fired the shot that wounded him, while searching for the mystic light.

“Who are you—where am I ?” he faltered, shrinking back from the stranger.

“You are here—I am myself. That is all you need know for a while. If you prove the man I fancy, I may tell you more. But, in the mean time, lie still. Your wounds need dressing, and I now have time to attend to them. Since you came I’ve been busy watching the movements of some of your friends—a very particular one, I judge, from a few words I heard him mutter,” and the tall man gazed keenly at the wounded outlaw.

“Who do you mean ? I don’t understand you,” he muttered, tremblingly.

“It was Jack Colton, I think,” slowly added the man.

Morton shrunk back in terror. He was totally unmanned now, and heard the name with a shudder.

‘He—you won’t let him—’

“No. He is gone ; but he must have followed you close. I thought you were good friends.”

“How—you know me ?” gasped Morton.

The strange man laughed.

“There are few persons in this region that I do not know. You go by the name of Jasper Morton. But I don’t think that is your real name. If it is, so much the worse for *you*. You will never leave this place alive.”

“Mercy—what harm have I ever done you ? Why should you threaten me this way ?”

“No particular harm, but you have *my secret*. That is reason enough. You may judge whether I am a man to baulk at trifles, by my having shot you as you were spying into my affairs. I have a secret and an end. That secret must be kept from *all* until my purpose is attained. If you come between, so much the worse for you ; you must be disposed of—or, in plainer terms, I shall kill you.”

“But if I am not really Jasper Morton ?” added the outlaw, anxiously.

“That matters little, unless you be one of two persons. Prove to me that you are either of those two, and you are safe.”

“And who are they ?” quickly asked Morton.

“That *you* must tell me—not I you. But never mind now. I must—”

The strange man abruptly paused in his speech, and the wounded outlaw uttered a gasp of terror. A wild, shrill cry—almost a yell, rung clearly upon their ears. It scarcely seemed like the voice of a human being, unless of one hopelessly insane.

The stranger frowned angrily, and a curse broke from his lips. Then he uttered a low, peculiar whistle, twice repeated.

Morton had turned half round, forgetting his pain in wonder and terror. As the whistle sounded the second time, he saw a dim, shadowy figure glide out from the darkness and stand before the old man.

Though he could not distinguish the features of this newcomer, Morton knew that she—for it was unmistakably the form of a woman—was young, from the lithe, rounded figure and agile, graceful movements.

The old man spoke a few quick words that the outlaw could not catch, then added aloud as he strode away :

"If he attempts to arise, Lola, shoot him. He must not escape yet."

"I do not fear him. If he is wise, he will lie still."

Morton could scarce believe his ears. The words and voice were in such direct contrast. The one soft and musical as the notes of a bird, the other stern and determined.

Strange events were crowding fast upon him that night, but this was the strangest of them all. Speechless and half-stupefied, he gazed upon the woman before him. Never before had he beheld such marvelous beauty—loveliness of a fiery, yet voluptuous, oriental type.

She was tall for a woman, several inches above the medium height, in fact, but all was the most perfect symmetry. Her hair, black, glossy and luxuriant, hung in heavy masses below her waist, unconfined save by a simple band of beaded doe-skin that crossed above her forehead. Of a dark, Spanish-like complexion, with large, lustrous eyes, cheeks tinged with the red blush of perfect health ; with full, slightly-pouting lips of scarlet, rich, juicy and tempting ; rounded chin, and graceful neck sloping down to a swelling bust that Venus herself might have envied ; a round, compact waist incased in a neatly-fitting dress of whitely-tanned doe-skin. Leggings of the same material fitted the round, swelling limbs, ending in dainty, beaded moccasins.

Standing in an attitude of careless ease, the strange beauty was gazing half-mockingly upon the wounded outlaw, one hand clasping the butt of a small, silver-mounted revolver with an ease that bespoke long use and perfect familiarity with the weapon.

"Who are you?" muttered Morton, staring at her as though at a phantom. "I've seen you before—where?"

"I am my father's daughter," and the strange girl laughed, clear and musically. "Do you think to gain from my lips knowledge that *he* refused you? Wait—in good time you shall know all or—nothing."

"You threaten, too? What sort of a hornets' nest is this I've got into, I wonder?"

The strange girl laughed, her eyes and white teeth gleam-

ing from out the dim light. But there was a peculiar expression to her face that sent a thrill through the outlaw's frame. He had seen its counterpart once, as he faced a wounded panther. In this woman's eyes there was the same cruel, deadly glitter that he had noted then.

Morton cast a quick glance around him. The dim light had imperfectly revealed his surroundings; still, he could tell that he was under ground.

The chamber he was in was low and irregular, of no great dimensions, the walls and roof of intermingled earth and rock. Around him hung various weapons, rifles, pistols, bows and arrows, Indian tomahawks and knives. Robes and furs were scattered around, or hanging from the walls.

The truth flashed upon him. The light he had discovered, came from this chamber, the entrance to which was in some manner concealed beneath or in the rocky barricade that intersected the *baranca*. In falling he had alarmed the inmates. Then the old man must have shot at him, in the treacherous light aiming too high to produce death, though a fraction lower would have ended the outlaw's career forever.

Morton shuddered again, and the girl turned her head quickly, the fire deepening in her eyes, as another cry came from beyond the point where the old man had disappeared. Then a low, gasping, gurgling sound and all was still.

"My God! there's murder going on in there!" cried the outlaw, half-arising, horror expressed in every feature.

"Lie still—move another inch and there'll be murder here, as well!" sharply uttered the girl, as the pistol rose to a level with Morton's head. "Down with you, or I fire!"

Morton sunk back, bathed in cold sweat. In a few moments the old man reappeared, wiping his hands upon his dress. The outlaw shuddered convulsively as he noted the dark, red stains that discolored the skin. What deed of horror had been enacted in that further chamber?

"You can go back to your station, now, Lola," he uttered, in a calm, even tone. "If I wish your presence, I will signal you. Now, sir," he added, as the woman disappeared from view, "I can attend to you. But first, let's see if there be any need of dressing your wounds. A man at my time of life dislikes unnecessary trouble. As I told you, if you are

Jasper Morton, or indeed, any other than one of two persons, there will be no need of dressing your hurts, because, in that case, you must be *disposed of*, before you have a chance to make known what you have discovered concerning this place and its inmates."

"You mean to—to *murder* me?"

"Exactly—that is the vulgar expression of what I mean."

"Why did you take me in here then?"

"Because—first, you seemed very curious to learn what was going on inside; entirely too curious to suit my ideas of propriety. So I shot you, and I meant to end your prying forever, too. But when I bent over you, to see if you were really dead, something in your face struck me, and I fetched you here to see what truth there was in the surmise. Now tell me—are you Jasper Morton; is that your real name?"

"No."

"Good! then what is? Remember, that the truth alone can avail you, if any thing. Of course you can not guess the names that run in my mind. Speak out—what is your real name?"

Morton's lips parted and his throat twitched, but he could not speak. The knowledge that his own lips might condemn him, was horrible. The resemblance that the old man had been struck with, might after all be mere fancy.

"Spare me—I will take any oath—will be your slave, your dog, if you spare my life," he muttered, great drops of cold perspiration starting out over his forehead.

"I take no man's oath," was the cold reply. "Speak out—or I will believe you lie in saying your true name is not Jasper Morton and reward you with this," and as he spoke, the cold muzzle of a revolver at full cock touched the outlaw's temple.

"Take it away—I will speak, if you only lower that!" gasped the wounded man, shrinking back.

"Very well. Be quick."

"My name is James—James Mestayer," falteringly.

"You are speaking the truth?" coldly demanded the old man, keenly eying the trembling wretch.

"Yes—the truth, so help me—"

"Never mind. Don't exult too soon. You had a brother?"

"Yes—Thomas. He died—was killed in California."

"What was your father's and your mother's names?"

"James and Lucinda."

"You had an uncle who married a sister to your mother?"

"Yes—father's brother Albert. And you—you are the man!" eagerly cried the outlaw.

"Yes, I am Albert Mestayer, your father's brother. In your face I saw what James was when young. That was what stayed my hand. I believed that you was my nephew, either James or Thomas, though I had not seen either for near twenty years. Then you can guess—but no, you were too young then, and I made James promise never to tell you the black story," muttered the old man, half to himself.

The outlaw, Mestayer, as we must now call him—gazed keenly and curiously at this strangely found relation. He scarce knew what to think. Until now, he believed him dead, for that was what they—himself and brother—had been taught to think.

"Never mind. We will talk matters over after awhile, when you are stronger. If what I have heard of you is correct, you may be of service to me. But now, let me look to your hurts, and you can tell me how you received the first."

As the old man's nimble fingers bound up the wounds, Mestayer told the events of that night, so far as he knew them, concealing nothing. He did not fear his uncle would shrink from the crime.

CHAPTER V.

THE MAIDEN'S PERIL.

OVER a week had passed by since the night on which this story opened, a week during which much had been done though little effected. Early in the day following the house-burning, a heavy shower fell that effectually obliterated all

trails left by the fleeing Night Hawks and also destroyed Campbell's hopes of discovering his lost friend with the aid of hounds.

Through that long week he had scarce rested an hour at a time, spurred on by the pleadings of Fred's sister, Fannie Hawksley. He searched every rod of the *baranca*, in company with Ruel and several other of the lost man's comrades, but without finding the slightest trace or clue. They clambered over the rocky barricade, little suspecting the secrets it concealed, or that the old man and his peerless daughter were silently laughing at them for their mole-like blindness.

Thoroughly convinced that their friend had not entered the *baranca* at all, the young hunters returned to the level prairie. There a surprise awaited them.

Beyond the *baranca*, a mile distant, they caught sight of a horse feeding upon the juicy grass. One glance sufficed. It was the big yellow horse Mott, on which Fred Hawksley had set forth in pursuit of the strange woman. The animal was alone, saddled and bridled. Nothing could be seen of his master.

The prairie around was closely scrutinized. One thing was plain; the horse had not crossed the *baranca*, nor been nearer to it than when found, since daylight, else the rain-moistened turf would have betrayed the fact. Following its trail, they found where it had stood for some time tied to the hanging limb of a tree, in a hollow hidden from the *baranca*, a mile or more distant. But nowhere could they find the imprints of human feet.

All was done that human ingenuity could devise, but at the end of the week, all was wrapt in darkness. Nothing was learned regarding the young man's fate, nor, during that time, had any thing been heard of the strange woman rider. Both had seemingly disappeared together, without leaving any trace.

The agonized grief of the bereaved family had settled down to a more quiet, though not less acute sorrow. The everyday duties of life must be performed, though the heart be breaking.

It was nightfall when a single horseman drew rein before the dwelling of Archibald Hawksley, dismounting, and, with

plump saddle-bags thrown over his arm, approached the front door with that assured freedom so characteristic of the West. There, hospitality is a matter of course. If sunset catches a traveler near a house, that, for the time being, is his home. He is welcomed, given the best the place affords, then sent on his way rejoicing. An experienced traveler never offers money in return; 'tis a poor reward for hospitality to insult a host.

The traveler in question bore evidence of having ridden many a mile, in the sand and dust that covered his garments, and his heavy horse-hide boots. There was a peculiar air about him that told a settler his occupation. Every thing, from the heavy, "black-snake" whip down, stamped him a drover.

Archibald Hawksley, a tall, stalwart man, bearing his years well, warmly greeted the stranger. Five minutes later, the drover was comfortably seated, pipe in mouth, awaiting the evening meal that Fanny was overseeing.

"Stranger in these parts, I reckon," quoth Hawksley, also "blowing a cloud," falling insensibly into the peculiar dialect of the parts, though a well-educated man.

"Yas—this is my fust trip this fur out, though I've traded over the line fer some y'ars. Met a feller in Naketosh" (Natchitoches) "last trip—fergit his name now, but reckon it don't matter much—who told me thar was a chaine fer right smart tradin' up this a-way; so here I be, ready fer business. I've got the money, you fellers hev got the spar' horses an' cattle, so I guess we kin come to tarms."

A man is never so grief-stricken as to entirely neglect his personal interests, and Hawksley was soon deep in "business talk" with Mark Haley, as the trader gave his name. There was little difficulty in coming to terms, for the trader offered good prices, seeming strangely liberal, for a drover.

During supper, Fannie several times caught his gaze resting fixedly upon her face, and felt a strange, ill-defined uneasiness that she could not entirely banish. And yet this close scrutiny might well be pardoned, for the maiden was very pleasing to look upon, and the drover seemed just in the prime of life, when one's fancy is most quickly caught by a fresh, lovely face.

Fannie Hawksley was more than ordinarily beautiful—indeed the family were noted for their good-looks, and she was the bright star of all. Under the medium hight, small and light as a fairy, her form was well developed and true-proportioned. Rich brown hair, a clear, fresh complexion, and melting hazel eyes—little wonder that Mark Haley gazed admiringly at her.

After supper was dispatched, the men stepped outside, and with lighted pipes, continued their bartering. Haley's eyes often wandered toward the house, seemingly admiring its structure, a two-story building being something of a novelty at that time, so far on the frontier.

That evening Ned Campbell called, as usual since Fred's disappearance, to report progress. It was the same story of baffled search. Nothing had been learned regarding the missing man.

Mark Haley seemed deeply interested in the story, but could offer no suggestion that had not already been tried. Hawksley sunk into a troubled reverie, and then abruptly retired, first showing Haley his room.

An hour later Ned Campbell took his departure, sad and heart-sick. For several months he had been Fannie's accepted suitor, but never until this night had she set the time for their wedding.

"Ned," she had said, looking up into his bold, handsome face, as his arms tightly encircled her lithe, rounded form, "I can not marry until Fred returns home, or—or is found. If alive, bring him here; if dead, bring me proof, and I will be yours. In this horrible uncertainty, I can think of nothing else. It is killing mother and father. Bring him back to us, and I am yours."

"If man can do it, Fannie, I will. But there seems little hope. Think what we have done—how we have searched. But, God helping me, I will find him. If only for your sake, I will not rest until I do. Good-by, darling. I will not come any more until I can bring you tidings, either good or bad. It only makes the work harder. Seeing your grief unnerves me. Good-by; pray for my success, and hope for the best, darling."

"God bless you, Ned," she answered, her bright eyes dim-

med with tears. "You deserve a better girl than I am, but I will make you happy if I can."

Campbell dared not reply in words, but their lips met in a long, clinging kiss of pure and holy love, then he tore himself away, and mounting his horse, galloped furiously away toward his own home.

Mechanically, Fannie closed and secured the door and windows, then covered up the embers in the fire-place with ashes, and taking a candle, slowly ascended the stairs to her chamber. Though she knew it not, eager eyes were fixed upon her form until the door closed behind her—eyes that burned with an evil glow—the eyes of Mark Haley, the drover.

The building was quiet and still. All seemed buried in profound slumber ; but there was one pair of eyes that thought not of closing ; one brain that was busy concocting a piece of diabolical treachery.

Nearly two hours passed by after Mark Haley watched Fannie Hawksley to her chamber, before he made a move. Then, with moccasins upon his feet, instead of the heavy boots, he noiselessly emerged from his room, having in one hand a small bull's-eye lantern, the slide only partially turned. In the other he held a small patch of what looked like soiled paper or cloth, and a coil of stout string. The bushy black beard seemed one-sided, as though it was false, and had become slightly disarranged.

In the darkness, but partially dispelled by the tiny ray of light, his eyes burned and glowed with a phosphorescent luster that marks the orbs of cruel, treacherous creatures, whether human or quadruped. Pausing, he bent his ear and listened intently.

The house was still as death. Evidently the inmates were all peacefully slumbering, for a time happily forgetful of their great loss.

Haley smiled viciously, showing the white teeth through the bushy mask of hair. He chuckled, low and exultantly. Thus far, his plans had worked admirably. The settler had not suspected him for other than he seemed.

It works like a charm—had I ordered all things, they could not have turned out better to my mind," he muttered, as his ear was bent close to the door of Fannie's chamber. "She

sleeps—I can hear her breathing regularly. If I can only reach her before she awakes. A cry from her lips would fetch that man upon me, and I do not wish to kill him—not yet; a different death than a quick one by a bullet awaits him. A thousand times I could have done that—but my revenge is better, much better.”

These last words were hissed forth with a venom indescribable. Though he knew it not, Archibald Hawksley was entertaining his most deadly enemy.

Gently Haley lifted the simple latch, and his eyes snapped exultantly as he found the door yield to his pressure. Deeply troubled, Fannie had neglected securing it before retiring, and now she lay at the mercy of this demon in disguise.

Closing the dark-lantern, Haley stealthily entered the chamber, closing the door behind him. That would be another barrier for sound to pass through, in case Fannie should take the alarm too soon for his purpose.

The maiden still slept peacefully, breathing soft and regularly. The bed was dimly revealed by the moonlight that filtered through the window shade, and the cat-like eyes of the intruder could just discern the outlines of the maiden's head and shoulder against the snowy pillow.

The light was sufficient for his purpose, and he gently placed the lantern upon the floor, crouching low down upon hands and knees. Thus, unless Fannie should raise up alarmed, he was hidden from her sight.

Stealthily, noiselessly, like a serpent of evil, the masked fiend crept toward the bedside, with ready implements that had been provided before entering the house. Fannie breathed on, soft and low, as he noiselessly arose and stood beside her.

A ray of moonlight fell upon her countenance, a soft luster-like halo encircled her head, a pearly tear glistened upon her cheek, but that fiend felt no pity—only a ferocious joy that he had thus far succeeded in his designs. The rich brown hair loosened from its fastenings, covered her neck and gently-heaving bosom as with a veil, while one hand seemed pressed above her heart to still its throbbings.

Only for a moment did Haley permit himself to gaze upon the picture of peaceful innocence, then he acted. One hand

hovered over the maiden's throat, while the other, holding the prepared plaster, clapped it adroitly over her mouth.

The maiden, thus rudely awakened, looked at the intruder with horror-distended eyes, but the cry she strove to utter, died away in her throat. The plaster closed her lips effectually, and the brawny hand tightly clutched her throat. Mark Haley was complete master of the situation.

"Lie still—act wisely and obey, or it will be the worse for you. I do not wish to harm you—will not unless you force me to do so. Remember this—if the house is aroused, it will be too late to save you. I will kill you first. You hear? I am not a man to idly threaten what I will not perform."

Fannie, half strangled, asked the question with her eyes—"What do you mean to do with me?" Haley seemed to read her meaning, for he replied:

"I do not intend to harm you, at least not now. But you must go with me. Remember, at the first attempt to alarm your father, I send this knife home to your heart," and as he hissed the words, Haley held a broad, keen blade before the maiden's eyes. "I tell you this as a warning. You will heed it if you have any love for life. But now listen. I said you must go with me. I mean it, and the ride will be long. As the night is chilly you will need wraps. Promise me not to attempt to remove this plaster, and I will free your hands so that you can slip on your clothes. Refuse, and I take you as you are, in night-dress alone. Quick—decide. I have no time to waste. If you promise, close your eyes."

Fannie read stern determination in her captor's eyes, and making the best of affairs, signed her assent as indicated. Haley laughed.

"Good! I thought that would touch you. Remember—you may arouse your father, but he will only find your dead body, and I can escape through the window. Here—now put them on quickly."

As he spoke, the villain handed Fannie her garments, and tremblingly she donned them, though the brute stood over her with uplifted knife. Haley thrust her shoes into the pockets of his great-coat.

"They would make too much noise. You can put them

on when we are safe outside. But wrap a blanket round you, or you might catch cold in the night air. You see how very careful I am of your health? Like a father—ha! ha!” and again his disagreeable chuckle jarred upon her ears.

Scarcely waiting for Fannie to secure her dress, Haley seized her arms and bound them firmly with the string he had provided, then served her ankles the same way. On second thoughts, seeing how trembling and unnerved the maiden appeared, he resolved to carry her, instead of trusting her to walk out of the dwelling.

With knife clenched between his teeth, Haley picked the maiden up in his strong arms and rested her over his shoulder, her arms pinned beneath her. Then he picked up the dark-lantern and stepped out upon the landing.

All was still below, save the monotonous ticking of the clock. The settler slept on, all unconscious of this second deadly blow that was being dealt him.

Opening the slide to throw a faint light before him, Haley began descending the stairs. Twice he paused and listened breathlessly as a stair creaked beneath his foot, but fortune favored him, and he gained the outer door in safety.

While he was undoing bolts and bars, Fannie moved restlessly upon his shoulder. Clutching her tightly he hissed a horrible threat in her ear. With a gasping gurgle, she resigned all hope of being rescued. She dared not give the alarm. She felt that instant death would follow, and, even in this great peril, life seemed very sweet to her.

Stepping outside, Haley gently closed the door behind him, then with a chuckle of fiendish triumph, he glided rapidly away from the house, toward the stable. Pausing outside, he deposited the maiden upon the ground, then clutched his knife firmly.

Only one obstacle now intervened between him and absolute victory, and he had strong hopes that he might avoid this. As the settler showed him the horses he wished to dispose of, Haley noticed a huge dog—an almost full-blooded mastiff—and learned that to his care was confided the stock at night. A sight rope held him to his post, but not strong enough to restrain him should an intruder approach. It was merely to keep his duty before him.

Haley, professing great love for dogs, had fondled and carressed the mastiff, with this end in view, and now hoped that he would be allowed to take his own horse without being molested. As he approached the entrance, a deep, warning growl told him that the dog was on guard. Softly whistling, though with ready knife, he stepped within. That the mastiff recognized him was plain, but he resolutely barred the way, growling deeply.

A curse gritted through Haley's teeth, as he saw that only over the dead body of this faithful custodian could he hope to secure his horse. Bending down he caressed the dog, then, like lightning the heavy knife was brought round, sinking to the very hilt in the dog's side. A half-stifled snarl and the huge brute leaped at the man's throat, bearing him to the ground like a child.

In this moment Haley showed his desperate courage. Not a sound escaped his lips, though the great jaws closed upon his throat. He jerked the knife from its sheath of flesh and plunged it again and again into the quivering body.

But this was needless. The dog was already dead. His leap had been merely convulsive, and the jaws barely closed upon Haley's throat. The teeth did not raze the skin.

Flinging the body from him, Haley arose and brushed the blood from his face, then quickly saddled and bridled his horse. Leading him forth, he once more picked up Fannie, mounting with the agility of youth.

Even now he did not forget his prudence, but rode slowly away, readjusting the bushy beard upon his face. Though late, he might meet with some person and this would aid in directing the search that he knew would follow with the morning.

"Now, my dear," he uttered, as he carefully removed the plaster from the maiden's lips, "I do this in pure kindness of heart, and I hope for your sake that you will not abuse my confidence. It's not likely we will meet with any of your friends, but if we *do* and you should cry out, that cry will be your last. You understand?"

"Where are you taking me? Why have you done this? What have I ever done to you that you treat me so?" faltered Fannie.

"Nothing—but your father has—much. Never mind now. It will be explained to you in due time. Until then, keep still. It will be better for you," was the brutal reply.

Fannie dared not disobey this command, and relapsed into silence. But with each passing moment her natural self-possession grew stronger, and she began to take note of the direction in which she was being taken. Haley made no attempt to prevent this. He seemed to feel that Fannie was too entirely in his power to make this knowledge dangerous to his plans.

Now that she was more herself, the maiden regretted not having given the alarm, while help was near, and inwardly resolved that should another opportunity offer, to embrace it at all hazards.

For over an hour Haley galloped steadily on, and Fannie felt her heart sink as she realized that they were now far beyond all habitations of her friends, with nothing but the vast, almost limitless prairie stretching out before them. Where was she being taken? What had fate in store for her?

Her eyes were closed, her head drooping in despair, when, with a low, fierce curse, Mark Haley suddenly drew rein. With hope thrilling her heart, Fannie eagerly raised her head and gazed around.

"Utter a whisper and I'll murder you!" hissed the abductor, venomously.

Fannie saw the reason he had uttered this caution. Before them, blocking the very path they had been pursuing, she could just distinguish the forms of three men. Though their features were indistinct, the dress bespoke them white men.

She saw in them a last hope. The threats of Mark Haley were forgotten or disregarded. In a clear, imploring voice she cried out:

"Help—for the love of God, save me!"

With a snarling curse Haley lifted his clenched fist and drove it forcibly full between her eyes. With a convulsive shudder, Fannie's head drooped and she lay a lifeless weight upon his arm.

"Hellow! what's the meanin' o' all this, anyhow?" gruffly demanded one of the three men, stepping forward, his rifle muzzle in advance. "What ye got thar, mister?"

"None of your business. Attend to your own affairs and don't meddle with mine," boldly replied Haley.

"Eh? Jes' lis'en, boys. Don't he crow loud? Reckon you don't know—why, hellow! Is 't you, Cap?" and the man lowered his weapon, his face expressing great surprise.

"I don't know you—stand aside or I'll give you cause to regret interfering with matters that don't concern you," snarled Haley, his revolver coming to a level.

"You will, eh? Is that the way you treat old pards, Jap Morton?" and the rifle was quickly raised to a level.

Would the man dare fire? In that dead, uncertain light, death to the maiden must almost assuredly follow.

"Curse you for a meddling rascal!" hissed Mark Haley, and his pistol spoke sharp and clear.

Like an echo the rifle responded. Then came a shrill cry—a heavy groan and dull fall; then more shots, a confused trampling—then all was still.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LOST TRAIL.

WITH the dawn of day, Archibald Hawksley emerged from the house, and set about his morning duties. Though he noticed the door was unbarred, he thought Fanny had forgot to secure it.

But he was not long deceived. As he entered the stable, a cry of rage and surprise burst from his lips. Before him lay the stiff and mangled body of his faithful mastiff.

One glance round the interior told him the stranger's horse was missing, though all the others were safe. Scarcely knowing what to think, he rushed toward the house, where he was met by his wife, pale and agitated.

"Father, where is Fannie?"

Pale and stern, with blazing eyes, the settler dashed up the stairs and burst open the door of the room assigned to their late guest. It was empty. The bed had not been pressed

that night. With a groan of heartfelt despair, he sunk into a chair. Though he knew not the cause of its being dealt him, he realized the full force of the blow.

"Father, where is Fannie?" repeated the pale and trembling wife, creeping to his side.

The voice and soft touch roused the stricken settler. In a moment he was himself again. With a desperate effort he regained his usual coolness, and set about the task that lay before him.

"God only knows, but I will find her. That man—that devil must have stole her. Fool that I was, to let his lying tongue so blind me! But he shall pay for it, by my hopes of heaven! I swear that I will have his heart's blood for this!"

"Oh! Fannie—my child, my poor child!" gasped the bereaved mother, for the first time realizing the full weight of this new blow.

"Peace, Esther," coldly added Hawksley, though the unnatural glitter in his eyes, and the feverish flush upon his face told how severe must be the effort at composure. "Weeping and wailing will do no good here. We must *work*. Do you go down and send the children round to the neighbors with the tidings. Bid them come here at once, ready for work. I will take his trail, and you can send them after me as they come in. I will leave plenty of signs so that they can easily overtake me. Be sure and send to Campbell's for Ned. Go now—there is no time to lose. I must look first if he left any clue."

Mrs. Hawksley, her terror and despair momentarily stilled by the stern and peremptory words of her husband, hastened down-stairs to dispatch the children, as directed, for assistance. Hawksley, cool and collected, began slowly searching the two chambers, in hope of finding some clue to the real object of the abductor.

This second blow, following so closely upon the disappearance of his only grown son, instead of crushing him to the earth, seemed to call forth all his energies, and to fit him for the difficult task that lay before him. Nothing was forgotten or overlooked.

He was disappointed in his search, for nothing was found

that could assist him in the quest. Then descending the stairs, he bade his wife fill his saddle-bags with food, his canteen with strong coffee, while he made ready his horse. Ten minutes later he was in the saddle, renewing his instructions regarding his neighbors when they should arrive.

He rode out from the yard, and making a broad circuit, quickly struck the trail. There could be no mistaking this, for it lay plainly imprinted upon the dew-moistened ground. Dismounting, he closely examined each of the four hoof-prints, registering them indelibly upon his memory.

"I'll not forget," he muttered, swinging himself once more into the saddle. "Large hoofs, shod in front; a triangular chip broken from the inside edge of the off hind foot. Now it only remains to follow the trail to its end. Sooner or later we must meet, and then, Mark Haley—if that be your name—beware! As God hears me, I will kill you without mercy! And if—if harm has come to my poor child, I'll torture you so that the most devilish red-skin would blush for shame at his ignorance!"

Bending low in the saddle, Hawksley rode on at a rapid gallop, his keen eye, sharpened by a knowledge of his child's peril, picking up the trail unerringly. Straight as the flight of a crow, for miles, led the trace.

Hawksley's brow darkened as he noted this. The abductor seemed striking for the broad, unsettled prairie. Could it be that he was one of those fiendish renegades who found a refuge among the Kiowas? He could think of no other solution for the abductor taking such a course.

"Never mind—'twill only be the easier to trail him, if he keeps away from the settled track. Ha! what is that?"

Checking his horse he bent down and picked up a circular patch of cloth, covered with some sticky substance. A groan broke from his lips as he divined the use it had been put to. One mystery was cleared up: that why Fannie had not given the alarm while being taken from her home.

"Curse him!" hissed Hawksley, hurling the bit of plaster away. "Curse my blindness in not seeing through his mask. Poor Fred's fate should have taught me more caution. But never mind—my time will come."

The settler, with flashing eyes and close-set teeth, continued

his course, picking up the trail with tolerable ease for one so little versed in the art as he was. He knew, by the position of the hoof-prints—they being planted one in a place, from eight to ten feet apart—that at this point Mark Haley had been advancing rapidly, at a gallop. In trotting, there would be two hoof-prints close together, one almost obliterated by the other, or, just the same as made while in a walk, save of larger stride.

Hawksley, by this fact, could guess pretty closely at the speed maintained by the abductor, and though he knew that his own progress was much slower, still he did not despair of overtaking the man. Doubly loaded, the fugitive must pause soon, if only to rest his horse.

The sun was two hours high, when a sight met the father's eye that caused a cold thrill to pervade his veins. For a moment he reeled in his saddle, and almost fell to the ground, but then, with pale face and starting eyeballs, he plunged spurs deep into his horse's flanks, and dashed madly forward.

A score or more dark, slowly-circling forms were hovering over the prairie directly before him, in close proximity to where the trail must lead, unless it swerved abruptly to one side or the other. The shadowy shapes were those of vultures, buzzards, crows—those filthy yet useful scavengers of the prairies.

They told the experienced settler a significant tale. They told him that death was before him, along the trail. That they were collecting round a horrible feast that had been prepared for them.

In his agony of fear, Hawksley believed that he was about to behold the dead and mangled remains of his child. Fearing this, with mad shouts he dashed forward, brandishing his arms wildly.

The filthy birds heard him and in silence widened their circles, rising higher and higher, joined by others that rose heavily from the ground seemingly loth to quit the spot. A brace of coyotes slunk away, howling lugubriously, with drooping tail and snarling teeth.

A heart-sickening sight lay before him, as he mechanically wrenched his horse to a standstill. A groan of agonized apprehension broke from his pallid lips as he reeled rather than sprung from his saddle.

One glance was all that he could give—then he sunk to the ground, bowing his head upon his knees, shuddering convulsively, like one suddenly stricken with a chill. The horrible truth seemed plain to him—he believed that before him lay strewn the remains of Fannie, his child.

The greensward was trampled and torn, stained here and there with crimson blotches that showed where veins had been drained of their life-blood. Around were scattered white and gleaming bones, already dismembered and clean-picked by the teeth of coyotes and beaks of birds. Tattered and torn, he saw a bright, particolored patchwork quilt that he knew had covered his daughter's bed. Further to one side was a fragment of her dress, also blood-stained.

Hawksley remained thus, bowed down in mute agony, until the quickly repeating thud of horses' hoofs approaching in rapid gallop roused him. Then he clutched his rifle and glared around, his bloodshot eyes blazing with vengeance.

"Hold! Hawksley—don't fire—we're friends," cried a loud, clear voice that he recognized through the blind passion that possessed him.

Slowly he lowered his rifle, passing a hand across his eyes, as though something obstructed his vision. He did not return the salutation, nor speak a word as the two young men rode up, but silently pointed a finger toward the ghastly relics that strewed the sword.

"My God! what is this?" gasped Ned Campbell, reeling in his saddle, shrinking back as a horrible fear struck to his heart.

Zeb Ruel—his companion—did not speak, but dismounted and slowly approached the spot. Leaning upon his rifle, Hawksley closely watched his movements, a convulsive tremor agitating his frame as Ruel coolly picked up one of the gnawed and disfigured skulls, turning it about and viewing it from different sides.

With a grunt he tossed the fragment aside, then looked around for the other—as one glance was enough to decide that at least two persons had met their death at this point. His actions were vastly different here, for this skull was smaller and more delicately shaped, such as one would naturally supposed a woman's to be.

Tremblingly the two men watched their companion. Upon him their hopes depended. He was by far the most acute and experienced of the trio, and besides was not so deeply interested as they. Hence his judgment was the more apt to be reliable.

Zeb Ruel did not touch this skull. The two watchers thought he seemed afraid to, and their hearts sunk still lower.

Whistling softly he strode slowly around the stained and trampled spot. He examined the blanket, then the fragment of Fannie's dress. There were other pieces of cloth, evidently from garments worn by a man. Several large buttons, and the texture of the cloth proved that.

Abruptly pausing he poked at some object with the butt of his rifle. Whatever it was seemed wound round a fragment of bone. Stooping, he gingerly freed it with his fingers, then held it aloft, critically eying it.

Campbell and Hawksley both uttered little cries. They could see that it was a mass of hair, though the dust that covered it, disguised the color.

Shaking it gently, Ruel examined it closely. A long low whistle, expressive of surprise, broke from his lips.

"What is it, Ruel?" faltered Hawksley.

"See! a skelp—no, by thunder! it's a false b'ard!" was the astonished reply.

"Let me see," and Hawksley snatched the article from Zeb's hands. Yes—it is his! He—Mark Haley wore this, and I—cursed fool that I am!—I thought it natural! Then it is true, as I feared—they are both dead! Fannie, my darling child—oh God!" and sinking to the ground, the stricken father burst into tears.

"Don't bother him, Ned," hastily muttered Ruel, as Campbell sprung from his horse. "It'll be the savin' o' him—them tears. He'd go plum crazy else—an' no wonder, nuther. First Fred, now the gal."

"Then you think—" faltered Campbell, chokingly.

"But we don't *know*," was the hasty reply, for Ruel knew in what relation the young couple stood to each other, and dreaded the result. "An' I never give up hope while thar's a chance left. She *may* be rubbed out; I don't say she isn't.

But why—who by? Surely the fellow wasn't cussed fool enough to kill her an' then hisself? You see *some one* must 'a' helped—an' that's jest what we must look for now. You must help—you're good on the trail—an' it'll keep you from gittin' as *he* is. Go that way—I'll go this. Look cluss round the aidges o' the trampled spot. Mebbe we kin find sunkthin' to pay us."

Separating, the two young men crouched low down, carefully and thoroughly scrutinizing every inch of the ground for several yards beyond the edge of the torn and trampled spot. Their search was successful, for at almost the same moment, a cry announced some discovery.

"What is it, Ned?" muttered Ruel, springing to his friend's side.

"Prints of a horse's hoofs at full gallop. See—they toe away, and—look! See the blood-spots!"

"Sure enough—plenty, too. But now the question is—was thar anybody on him? Right here he looks as if he was runnin' loose-like. But let that rest fer a bit, an' come over an' look at my find. I want your 'pinion on it. Them pesky wolves hes 'most blotted it out."

"It's the print of a man wearing a boot," muttered Campbell, after a close scrutiny. "He is leaving this place—on a run. See how the toes cut in?"

"Right—but—"

"With boots on, you say?" interrupted Hawksley, who had risen unobserved.

"Yes, and large ones too."

"Then *he* did not make them, for he left his boots at the house, with his empty saddle-bags."

"Likely he took moccasins out o' the bags, so's to step easy," suggested Ruel.

"Hark! some one is coming."

"Two, rather, from the sound. Yes—see; it's Fenton an' Morley. Jest in time, boys," he added, as the two men rode up to the spot. "We want you, with Hawksley here, to take an' foller up this trail, while Ned an' I look to t'other 'ne. Grupp the feller *alive*, mind ye. Whoever he is, he kin tell all what happened here last night. Think you kin foller it, Morley?"

"Ef any man kin, I kin," quietly replied the little, weasen-featured hunter, throwing his bridle-rein to Fenton.

"If you git him, send up a smoke o' wet grass. We'll see it, an' we'll do the same if we git sure news fust."

But little more was said. Hawksley had by this time entirely regained his composure, and, though he firmly believed that his child was dead, he resolved to bear up until he had drank deeply of revenge. He, together with Fenton and Morley, set forward upon the trail, the old hunter tracing it up with the certainty of a blood-hound.

Campbell rode his horse, leading that of Ruel, who preferred walking at present, though the trail was plain enough to be followed from the saddle. He was trying to decide whether the madly-fleeing horse was ridden, or not; a difficult task at the best, unless by long trailing.

"It's the crittur that is hurt," muttered Zeb, after a while, "an' that too in the head or neck. 'Ca'se why? You see the drops o' blood is mostly scattered in a line, an' on some o' them is scattered dust an' dirt. Then ag'in, you see them on the side, cl'ar o' the trail; see—here's one. Now thar—thar's two on *t'other* side. He does that by shaking his head. Ef he was hurt in the side, it'd be one-sided—the blood, I mean. Hold—stop!"

Campbell abruptly pulled up, and Ruel closely scrutinized the ground for a minute in silence. Then he arose and leaped into the saddle. He had decided that the horse was ridden.

"You kin see it from here," he added, in answer to Ned's inquiring looks. "See—it looks like the hoss had stumbled, then stopped half-way, in a heap. The ground is smooth, he didn't stumble because he was growing fainty, for see—thar go his tracks es reg'lar es ever. Whoever rid him, was in a powerful hurry. You see he jerked the reins an' stuck spurs in the brute so hard that it made him change his step. That's what made the blurr thar. Unless the hoss had been ridden, thar'd jist bin one stumble, then the same clean step as afore.

"Now look well to your weepens," he added, as he set forward at a hard gallop. "Thar's a man ahead o' us, an' he was mixed up in the scenes back thar. Whoever he is we must take him; but don't do no more'n cripple the cuss."

"We're not far from the river, now."

"No. The varmint is makin' straight for it. The fool—a hoss thet hes lost a bushel o' blood like this 'ne hes, hain't got no call tryin' to cross the ford *now*. I only hope he won't drownd the man, too."

As Campbell said, they were near the river that was spoken of in our first chapter, as flowing close to the hunters' bivouac. The ford was almost directly opposite the camp, and the trail was running in a bee-line for it.

"I knowed it—see, the tracks lead down into the water," muttered Zeb, his keen eyes searching the further banks. "Mebbe he crossed, but I reckon he had to swim for it. Over we go—it's the quickest way."

The horses took willingly to the water, and though at one time they were forced to swim desperately in the raging current, their strong limbs prevailed and the two hunters were soon in safety at the other shore. Zeb Ruel leaped into the shallow water, tossing his reins to Campbell, saying: "Hold them, Ned. Mebbe I kin tell if he crossed clean over. I marked his tracks."

But the soft mud was so deeply cut and scarred by different hoof-prints that he could not tell with certainty. Then the two men began closely scrutinizing the ground between the river and the timber.

For full half an hour they searched without success. It was evident that the horse had not crossed, and Paul was inclined to believe that the rider had been swept off into the deep water below, when, hampered by his wounded steed, his death would almost inevitably follow.

"Ha! look yonder!" cried Campbell, directing his companion's attention over the river to a tall column of dense black smoke.

"It's the boys—they've found somethin' on the other trail. We'd better go back."

As he uttered these words, the tall hunter suddenly paused, and bent his ear to the ground for a moment. Then rising he glided swiftly toward the arch-like opening between the two timber islands; reaching this he beckoned vehemently for Campbell to follow.

"Look yonder!" he hissed, grasping Ned's arm with con-

vulsive force, his other hand outstretched toward the open prairie.

"The woman—that strange rider—the one that decoyed Fred Hawksley from us!" gasped Campbell, in wonderment.

"It's her—shure! Kin you take her? Your critter's fresh. Ketch her an' you kin tell whar Fred's gone to"

"I'll do it or kill my horse. Stand aside, Ruel," excitedly muttered Campbell.

"Easy—she's comin' closter. Look to your girth—see that it don't fail ye now. Ef you cain't do better, drop 'ither her or her critter. Ha! she has caught sight o' you. Durn it! why didn't we hide closter!"

It was true. Upon a ridge scarcely a mile distant was the strange woman, riding the spotted mustang that had served her so well when Fred Hawksley was in pursuit. The sun shining clearly, had outlined the two hunters clearly against the open background, and she had evidently caught sight of them, for she drew rein, gazing in their direction with one hand shading her eyes.

As Campbell leaped upon his big bay horse, she wheeled the mustang and dashed back over the swell like an arrow. Touching his mettled horse, fairly warmed to his work by the morning's ride, Ned sped swiftly over the rolling prairie, almost in the same tracks that he had made a week before, when pursuing the same creature. Would this chase end as disastrously? His brow darkened and his teeth gritted fiercely as he resolved to give the race a different termination.

A fierce joy filled the young ranger's heart as the woman rider again appeared in sight, for he could see that already he had lessened the interval between them. Both animals evidently were fresh, and it was to be a test of their superiority—a war of races.

As they topped the next swell, Campbell's face changed. He it was that was losing ground now. The spotted mustang stretched out like a grayhound, was running with the speed and evenness of an arrow's flight. Bending forward, the strange rider seemed urging him on at top speed.

Campbell's spurs dripped well with blood, and his voice added its persuasion, but in vain. Slowly, surely the spotted mustang was drawing away from the big horse.

Campbell uttered a furious curse as he noted this, but then a gleam lighted up his countenance. The fugitive was heading directly for the timber point where he had lost sight of her and Fred Hawksley, a week previously.

Now, should she disappear as strangely as then, he would know that she was concealed somewhere in the *baranca*, and it would go hard but that he unearthed the mystery. With these thoughts, Ned urged his beast forward, at its best pace.

As the woman neared the timber point, she turned her head and glanced back over her shoulder. Campbell almost fancied that he could detect her scornful, taunting laugh as she waved a hand toward him, then bending forward, disappeared around the clump of trees.

"Now I will know—if she is gone, then I have her foul. I'll solve the mystery of Fred's disappearance, and that too before this day's sun sets!" he muttered, as his spurs rankled the big horse's sides.

In a few moments he also rounded the point of trees, and abruptly pulled up his horse, with a low cry. As he suspected, the prairie was open and untenanted. The strange rider had disappeared.

But then as he glanced downward at the tracks of the spotted mustang, Campbell saw that they turned abruptly to the right, running close to the underbrush, instead of heading for the *baranca*. For a moment the young hunter was disconcerted.

CHAPTER VII.

ON GUARD.

NED CAMPBELL sat his horse with an air of irresolution. For a moment he appeared at a loss what course to pursue.

He glanced quickly around him. The black column of smoke had disappeared. Evidently Zeb Ruel had regained the other party.

Ned was in a quandary whether to hasten to join them, to search for Fannie, or to follow up the faint clue that lay be-

fore him, which might lead to the discovery of his lost friend and almost brother, Fred Hawksley. With an effort he decided.

"It is what Fannie would wish, did she know it," he muttered, as he shook the reins free. "There are better eyes than mine at work over yonder, and I could do no particular good. She would tell me to hunt for poor Fred."

Campbell was following the trail of the spotted mustang bending low in his saddle, for the ground was rapidly becoming more hard as he advanced, and the small hoofs had not cut deeply into the turf. Though keen-eyed, the young hunter soon found that he must dismount, or run the risk of losing the trail altogether.

Like a well-trained dog, the big bay horse followed him at a little distance. Step by step Ned picked up the trail, that gradually grew fainter and more indistinct.

Its course led along nearly equidistant from the *motte* and the *baranca*, yet heading so that, if maintained, the *baranca* would be headed. Yet Ned knew that this could not have been done, in the short time that he was hidden from view. He knew that the trail either entered the wood or else the *baranca*.

If the former, he must find it; if the latter, a few minutes' delay would matter little, as the rider could not possibly leave it without his knowledge, for both ends were within his range of vision. Reasoning thus, Campbell kept on for over half a mile, more than once losing the trail, only to find it again the next moment.

But now he lost it altogether. A strip of flinty ground led from the *baranca* clear to the timber's edge. At the edge of this strip, all traces ended.

One glance decided this, and then Campbell skirted the further side, until at the underbrush. He saw that a horse could not have forced a passage into the timber without leaving unmistakable traces of so doing. A grim smile lighted up his countenance. He knew now that the *baranca* contained his quarry.

"So much settled," he muttered, triumphantly. "I don't think the time is lost, for now I will have only one side to watch. Come, Miss, madam, whichever you may be. I

think you will find it harder to pull the wool over my eyes now than last week. It's you and I for it now, and the smartest brain wins."

Signing for his horse to follow him, Campbell looked to his rifle, and glided toward the edge of the *baranca*. He paused upon the edge, and while closely scrutinizing much of its bottom as possible from his position, he meditated deeply.

"It's plain," he muttered, finally, "she took the piebald with her, else I must have seen its tracks. There are places where a horse can be concealed down there, but not many. Now shall I go down and hunt her out? No—were it only for myself, I would, and take the chances of her picking me off with that rifle of hers. But then! Fred. I won't lose the game now by carelessness or foolishness. She must come out some time. I can stand it as long as she can. But first, for a good stand. Ha! I have it—the pile of rocks. She must be this side of that, for a goat could scarcely clamber over it. That will do. Then I'll only have one way to look."

Ned only hesitated for a moment, then narrowly examined the side of the *baranca*. As another proof that his suspicions were well founded, he soon discovered a path, narrow and steep, yet amply wide enough to permit a sure-footed horse to ascend or descend without much difficulty, leading down to the bottom of the ravine. His keen eye could detect the signs of hoofs having pressed its surface, though how recently could only be surmised.

"It leads in the right direction, too—that is, toward the pile of rocks. Somewhere near that I believe lies the secret. If so, the game's mine."

The young hunter had decided upon his course. Craft and cunning must be his aid now. The stakes played for were far too important to be lost by a rash or premature move.

Motioning his horse to remain stationary, Ned hastened to the timber and soon secured several small leafy branches, and a handful of dried grass. Holding these, he glided cautiously along the escarpment, his eyes closely scanning every foot of the bottom.

He neared the rocky barricade without discovering any thing that could possibly afford concealment for a horse, and then crouching down, he narrowly examined the pile. It will be remembered that he, in company with the other young hunters, had searched the *opposite* side of the barricade, on the night Fred Hawksley disappeared.

Campbell saw numerous crevices and small cavities, but none nearly large enough to admit the passage of a horse, yet, knowing that upon this point rested his last chance, he set about his work. First he started the big horse out, a few yards from the escarpment, beyond sight from the ravine, yet so that a single leap would carry him ready to mount. Then with strips cut from his hunting-shirt, he carefully bound the twigs and dried grass upon his head and shoulders, in such a manner that his vision was unobstructed, while concealing his form. This arranged to his satisfaction, he lay down upon the ground, with eyes riveted upon the rocky pile, his weapons ready for use.

Ned was a true hunter. More than once he had lain in wait for game almost without stirring a muscle, for half a day. And now this quality stood him in good stead; only this time his game was human.

For two hours he lay motionless, patiently watching, only shifting his gaze occasionally up the *baranca*, to make sure that his quarry was not escaping him in that direction. As he cautiously turned his head toward the barricade, after one of these glances, a glow of light filled his eyes, and he started convulsively.

He saw that his surmises were well founded. Before him stood the woman—the strange rider whom he firmly believed to be a decoy for some deep and subtle purpose.

Campbell could plainly distinguish her features, together with the upper portion of her form as she stood behind a boulder, her face uplifted toward his position. Even in that brief glance he was forcibly impressed with her beauty.

He had time but for the one glance, for then the vision disappeared like magic. How, was plain. He could still see the dark niche that her form had filled, and he knew that this must be the entrance to some underground retreat that had, most probably, been washed out by the surgings of the

water that frequently filled the *baranca* to its brim, in the rainy seasons.

His resolution was taken in a moment. He forgot his usual prudence, in the thought that the solution of his friend's strange disappearance lay within his grasp. He did not give a thought to the danger he might be running, nor of the force he might encounter in his search for the strange woman.

"Run to earth at last!" he muttered, as he looked to the caps of his revolvers. "You shall not escape me this time. I'll know where Fred is if I have to force the words from your lips."

Campbell critically scanned the side of the *baranca* beneath him. It was precipitous, and yet he did not like to lose the time for going up to the path. So lowering himself by the hands, he dropped lightly to the rocky ground beneath, accomplishing the feat in safety.

Drawing a revolver, he cautiously moved the rocky pile, his eyes riveted upon the opening in which he had beheld the strange woman. As he peered into the dark hole, for the first time a doubt as to the prudence of his course struck him, and he hesitated, in doubt whether it would not be wise to signal to his friends, knowing that the smoke column would quickly bring some of them to his side.

Better for him had he followed this plan, but with the game so close at hand, he could not bring himself to wait. Perhaps, after all, she was alone.

Forcing himself to believe this, Campbell placed a hand upon the boulder, and lightly vaulted into the crevice. All before him seemed dark and black, and he paused for a moment to accustom his eyes to the change.

At that juncture a slight rustling sound met his ear, and quick as thought, he threw forward his left arm, at the same time raising his pistol. The action was purely instinctive, for he could see nothing, but it probably saved his life.

A crushing blow from some unseen weapon fell upon his fore-arm, hurling it helpless to his side, then all was a blank. The same blow had fallen, though with broken force, full upon his forehead, felling him senseless to the rocks.

The sight of this strange woman had set Campbell's brain

on fire, and he acted without the slightest precaution or forethought. Had he but reflected for a moment, he must have known that she had noticed him, recognizing the presence of an enemy, even through the disguising grass and twigs. What else could have caused her sudden retreat? But Ned was too greatly excited to notice this, and he suffered the consequences.

How long he remained insensible he never knew, but it must have been for some time, for, when he awoke, a scene something similar to that which met the wounded outlaw's astonished gaze greeted his vision. The experience of the two men had been almost exactly similar. Both had narrowly escaped death at the hands of the same being—the old man, Albert Mestayer.

But Ned was more fortunate, in that he found his hurts carefully dressed. This was the first point that he noticed on returning to consciousness. The next was, that a thong or cord of some kind held his feet firmly to the rude but comfortable pallet upon which he lay.

"Father, he has awakened," uttered a low, soft voice from close to his head, and Campbell heard a faint rustle there.

The voice thrilled through his brain like liquid music. Never before had he heard tones so sweet or melodious. In wonder at it, he forgot his hurts, his perilous situation—everything but the voice.

A light step echoed through the rock-bound chamber, and a tall form came and stood over him, with folded arms, gazing down upon his countenance with vividly-glowing eyes. It was the man who had called himself Albert Mestayer, but Ned could not remember having ever met him before.

"You are right, Lola. Go, now. I wish to be alone with this man for a time."

A light, graceful form glided past him and paused within range of Campbell's vision, her eyes resting softly upon his face. A light of pity seemed to beam from their liquid depths as she uttered:

"You will not—not harm him, father?"

"Go—it is not your place to question me. You forget yourself, child," sternly replied Mestayer, his brow contracting.

With another glance at the bewildered hunter, Lola disappeared from view. Then the eyes of the two men met fully and Campbell read in those of the tall man a depth of hatred that for a moment chilled his blood. But then his courage returned, and he was once more himself, cool and collected.

"Well, sir, will you tell me what this treatment means, if, as I suppose, you are the one who struck me in the dark?"

"And may I ask why you were prowling round my home with drawn revolver?" retorted Mestayer.

"I was seeking for a friend, and had reason to believe that he was detained here by force," boldly added Campbell, closely eyeing the old man; but the sneering smile didn't change in the least.

"Who do you allude to?"

"Fred Hawksley. He followed your—that woman here, a week ago, and has not been seen or heard of since."

"How do you know that he came here?"

"I was with the party that followed him and her. We saw by the trail that he came here."

"I thought as much. Well, there is no need of keeping the truth from you, for I don't think you will ever betray me—for a very good reason. He did come here—in much the same manner that you did. But he is not here now," and the old man laughed diabolically.

"You did not murder him?" faltered Campbell.

"Never mind. You had far better be thinking of your own self. It may be beyond your power to do so ere long.

"Threatened men live long. But tell me: *where is Fannie Hawksley?*" suddenly added the young hunter.

This random shaft told. Mestayer started and seemed confused. Campbell saw that his sudden suspicion was correct.

"How did you find—what do you know about that? But bah! I'm a fool. It's only guess-work. You are nobody's fool, my friend. I give you credit for that. But first—before I answer you, what is she to you that you take such an interest in her?"

"She is my promised wife."

"*Was*, you mean. I am glad to see that I was not misinformed. Prepare yourself, my poor friend, for some affecting news," he added, mockingly. "Your true love is no

more. However, you have one consolation. You will not be long separated from her."

"Bah! I know you are lying—I can see it in your eyes," scornfully retorted the young hunter.

Mestayer started and his face flushed darkly, his eyes blazing with anger. His clenched fist uprose as if to deal a crushing blow upon the pale but undaunted face of the hunter, when a lithe form sprung forward and caught his arm. It was Lola.

"Father—think what you do! Strike a bound and helpless man—for shame!"

With an effort that seemed wondrous in a man so old, he hurled the maiden across the chamber, with a bitter curse.

For a moment Campbell thought he meant to slay her, but then with an effort, Mestayer calmed his passion, saying in a stern tone:

"Go, now, and see that you keep your station. No more eavesdropping, or it will be the worse for you. Stay—I forgot. Remain here and keep guard over this man, until I return. It is time James was going."

Lola returned and sunk down beside the couch where lay the young hunter. His gaze followed her motions and then their eyes met; but only for a moment. Then Lola's eyes drooped, a burning blush suffusing her rich complexion. Very different was her appearance then from what it had been when confronting James Mestayer, under somewhat similar circumstances.

In point of fact she was in greater peril at that moment than Campbell himself. The face of the handsome hunter had made a deep impression upon her heart, and for the first time in her life, Lola began to realize the meaning of the term, *love*.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT BAY.

WHEN he left Ned Campbell, Albert Mestayer entered the first chamber or cell, where we a week previously to this date, found him bending over the wounded leader of the Night Hawks. Here that worthy, now recognized as a nephew of the old man, was idly lolling upon a pallet of skins, his wounds almost entirely cured.

He raised himself to a sitting posture as the old man entered, casting at him a quick, inquiring glance. Evidently the doughty leader of the Night Hawks regarded his newly-found relative with considerable respect.

"Well?" he added, as the old man approached.

"It is well, so far, but we must work to keep it so. This young fellow tracked us home, and his are not the sharpest eyes on the border. Hawksley is out with the settlers. They may find this place at any hour, and then, though I could make a good fight first, my revenge would be cut short by death. You know my reasons for acting thus, because I have told you my story. Well, the time has come for you to play your part. I need your help now, because I can not leave Lola here alone. Are you ready to keep your oath?"

"Yes. Tell me what I am to do, and I will not fail for lack of trying," was the prompt reply.

"Good! I like to hear men answer like that. But now listen. You remember what I told you about the Kiowa chief, Chigilli?"

"Yes."

"Well, you must go from here, to him, as speedily as possible. Tell him that the time has come when he can strike the blow. Tell him that his white father asks the aid of his strong arm. Or stay—I can do better than that. See—Chigilli gave this to me. It is his totem; this border is made from sacred wampum. Give this to him and bid him follow

you. Lead him and his band here. When you come I will have all in readiness for the blow. You shall have Mary Colton—though she is one of the accursed, I spare her life, because I know that as *your* slave, her life will be worse than death."

"You are complimentary," muttered the outlaw, in a slightly bitter tone.

"I speak the truth. But let that pass. You must go now. You have not forgotten any of my instructions? You remember the rendezvous?"

"I forget nothing. But how am I to go? On your horse?"

"No. I may have use for him. But our young friend left his horse staked out upon the prairie above. Take it—that will be the easiest way to dispose of it, to keep it from telling troublesome tales. Ride out from the *baranca* until you strike ground that will take and hold a trail, then round the head of the ravine. After that do not spare the brute. Horse-flesh is cheap, and Chigilli will furnish you with a remount."

"But why—"

"For this reason. If this Ned Campbell is missed—which of course will be the case—search will be made for him. His horse's trail will be struck here. As it leads, so will they follow, and play into our hands by meeting you half-way. In that case, you know what to do. The Kiowas are eager for scalps. Let them take all they can—only tell Chigilli that he must bring me Hawksley a *prisoner*. You understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now go and ride for life. By nightfall you can reach the rendezvous—by day-dawn you should be well on your road back here."

But few more words were spoken, and James Mestayer left the strange retreat, and, after first cautiously scouring the surrounding prairie, dragged himself over the escarpment. After some little trouble, he secured the suspicious horse, and literally obeying the old man's instructions, soon rounded the *baranca's* head, then galloping swiftly away toward the west.

Hour after hour throughout that long day, he urged on the

big horse, plying the spurs heavily and mercilessly, with only a few brief intervals for breathing his steed. Nowhere in the world are such reckless riders as in the Texan prairies, or among the cattle-districts of Kansas. Nowhere is so little regard paid to the life of a horse.

I know of one instance where a young man, naturally generous, affectionate and kind-hearted, on a two days' trip rode three ponies until they dropped dead under the saddle. And this with no more urgent cause than that he was eager to meet with his relatives after a nine months' sojourn herding cattle in lower Kansas. In forty hours—two days and one night—he rode three hundred and seventy-odd miles.

As the sun set, Mestayer caught sight of the hill-range in which he knew the Kiowa chief was awaiting a message from the old man, his "white father." With bloody heel he urged on the heavily-laboring horse, though the blood-stained froth that dropped in flakes from its mouth, told plainly that the creature's race was well nigh run.

While yet the western sky was flecked with crimson, the end came, finding Mestayer prepared for it. Well knowing the symptoms, he was ready for the fall, and when the big bay fell forward heavily, the blood bursting from his nostrils, Mestayer alighted nimbly upon his feet, and without a second glance at the poor brute, he started forward with long, swinging strides that spoke well for his powers as a pedestrian.

The dark, broken hill-range was near, and at a glance the outlaw recognized the landmarks given him by his uncle, and he knew that his course had been shaped aright. Raising a hand to his mouth, he uttered a long-drawn, vibrating cry—the shrill view-hallo of the Kiowas. A few moments later there came to his ears a similar cry, only more perfectly modulated, and then a single horseman rode forth from a rocky defile that partially intersected the hills.

Despite his assurance that Chigilli was friendly, Mestayer twitched his revolver around more convenient to his hand, loosening it in the sneath. More than once he had experienced the treacherous nature of Indians, and the Kiowas were notorious for their proficiency in that respect.

The savage drew rein close beside the outlaw, and a brief but keen scrutiny followed, as though each was mentally mea-

surging the other. Mestayer was somewhat surprised at the appearance of Chigilli. Naturally, one takes it for granted that a famous warrior must be an important person in looks as well as reality. Instead, the Kiowa chief was small—almost a dwarf, in fact; of slight, ill-shaped figure, old and wrinkled, with only one eye. But that burned brightly, and the numerous scars, together with the broad saber-slash that had destroyed his left eye, together with a portion of his nose, testified plainly that he had borne his part in more than one desperate affray.

“Who are you that sounds the Kiowa cry, yet wear the skin of a pale-face?” demanded Chigilli, in slightly accented English, his half-breed mother having taught him her father’s tongue.

For answer Mestayer produced the slip of wampum-enriched deer-skin, and handed it to the chief. Chigilli’s stern countenance instantly relaxed, and he henceforth treated the outlaw with the greatest deference and courtesy. Mestayer quickly made known the purport of his visit, and delivered, word for word, his uncle’s message.

Chigilli seemed a little vexed, but soon explained the cause. While waiting for the message from his white father, which was longer in coming than he had expected, his band had become separated, by far the larger portion being then in pursuit of a drove of buffaloes that had passed by on the run, the day before. Fearing to lose such an opportunity for securing a supply of meat for his lodges in winter, he had dispatched all but twenty of his men after the herd.

Mestayer was positive. There must be no delay; such as could not be avoided were they to send a runner to recall the hunters. He must return at once, whether Chigilli kept his pledge or not.

This decided the chief, and half an hour later he led the twenty warriors out from the rocky defile. Behind him, upon the broad, smooth surface of a rock, were depicted sundry rude signs and symbols, drawn with a finger-point covered with dampened powder. These were directions for the guidance of the buffalo-hunters, bidding them hasten after.

Mestayer found that he would not be able to regain the *baranca* retreat by daybreak, for the east was showing light

streaks when there remained still a dozen or more miles to be covered. Then came an interruption, before another mile was traversed.

Events had occurred much as the old man, Albert Mestayer, had foreseen. Zeb Ruel had rejoined the other party of trail-hunters, informing them of where and how he had left Ned Campbell. In due course of time the young man was missed, searched for, and the trail found. They followed it after the outlaws had taken it up, round the *baranca*, and out into the prairie. As night fell they went into camp, when they were joined by others of the settlers who had turned out to take part in the hunt.

It may be as well to state here the cause of the smoke-signal having been made. Following the trail of the men on foot, the party had been considerably delayed by Hawksley's having a fit of apoplexy, in consequence of his deep emotions. As soon as his senses returned, he urged them to lose no time, but to keep on the trail, and when his strength returned, he would follow on after them. They did so, the trail ending at last in their finding the senseless body of a white man, whom they naturally took to be the abductor of Fannie. For this reason they sent up the smoke. Noticing the signal, Hawksley managed to mount his horse and ride to the spot. His disappointment at seeing a stranger was great, and brought on another and more severe fit. While it lasted, and while the attention of all was directed toward him, the outlaw breathed his last. This was the state of affairs when Zeb Ruel came in and told his story. After some discussion, it was decided to go back and take up Ned Campbell's trail, in hopes that, should he capture the strange rider, the mystery might be elucidated.

This party it was that now confronted the Kiowas, under guidance of the ex-captain of Night Hawks. Mestayer was by no means pleased at the meeting, for he saw that the settlers were nearly equal in numbers to the Kiowas, and he also knew that they were much better armed, each man bearing a rifle and at least one revolver, more generally two of these terrible weapons.

As the Kiowas were nominally at peace with the whites, a collision might and probably would have been avoided, only

for one thing. Jack Colton was among the trail-hunters, and he recognized the would-be murderer of his brother.

With a wild cry he plunged spurs rowel-deep into his horse's flanks and sprung forward, leveling his rifle as he did so. It cracked—one of the savages riding close behind Mestayer, uttered a shrill death-yell, and fell to the ground, dead.

That put an end to all doubt. Sounding his war-cry, Chigilli led the charge, and the next moment the two bodies were mingled together. For several minutes the conflict raged with deadly ferocity, but the superior weapons of the settlers quickly turned the tide in their favor.

Jack Colton had singled out the outlaw guide, and nothing loth, Mestayer gratified his desire, though still feeling the effects of his wounds. Their horses came violently together just as their pistols spoke for the first time.

Rearing, Colton's horse received the bullet between its eyes and fell, hurling Colton violently to the ground, where he lay, stunned for the moment. Mestayer discharged a second shot at him, but with unsteady aim, and a slight flesh wound was the only result; then he was forced to turn his attention to other foemen.

Chigilli gave the signal to retreat, seeing that he was over-matched. The hills were near at hand, and for them their horses' heads were turned, in full flight.

So sudden was this movement that the settlers did not comprehend its meaning until the Kiowas had gained full two-score yards the start. But then they dashed on in hot pursuit.

No man living understands better how to extract every ounce of service from a mustang than does a Kiowa, and though riding by far the most jaded horses, they slowly increased their vantage-ground, aided by the fact that the settlers devoted much of their care to pistol practice; at best but an uncertain art while riding a galloping horse.

They realized their error and strove to remedy it, but too late. The Kiowas had gained too many yards to be overtaken, and the cunning Chigilli well knew what he was about. He was rushing for a point from which his force could easily hold the settlers in check, or at least inflict fearful slaughter in case they should try a desperate charge first.

Zeb Ruel divined their purpose first, and kept the settlers from going too far. He knew a plan worth two of that, and as the Kiowas disappeared in a narrow, defile-like cleft, the settlers drew rein.

"Quick—Fenton, you an' Morley come 'th me," he cried, eagerly. "Rest o' you stay here an' keep the imps back ef they try to run out. We'll fix 'em—hurry."

As he spoke he turned his horse's head to one side and dashed rapidly up to the hill's base, here steep and rugged. Though not exactly comprehending his purpose, the two men designated by name followed him without hesitation.

Dismounting they clambered rapidly up the hill, soon gaining the top. An exultant shout broke from Ruel's lips as he saw that he was in time. If indeed the Kiowas contemplated escape by such means, they would find their path a gantlet of death.

The defile alluded to ended in a steep hill, up which a horse could climb, though with difficulty. This once surmounted, a broad, gentle slope led down to the prairie beyond. Ruel's position commanded this ascent, and was within easy pistol range.

"Good ! we've got 'em in a hole, now !" he chuckled, breathing hard with fatigue. "We kin make things hot for 'em, I reckon !"

But though he suspected it not, he was even then, in a measure, being outwitted. Chigilli had no intention of fleeing further. With his men dismounted and well covered, he felt able to beat back the settlers should they attack him, until help should arrive, and not a score seconds before Ruel reached his station, a Kiowa crossed the ridge, sent to hurry p the other band !

CHAPTER IX.

A STRANGE PROPOSAL.

THE hours dragged by drearily enough with Ned Campbell, though for a part of the time he had the beautiful Lola for a guard. But after the first flush of surprise, Ned gave her little attention. His mind was filled with thoughts of his lost love, Fannie Hawksley, whom the old man, his captor, declared was dead. Though the young hunter tried to believe this a falsehood, his success was only partial. At times he would believe that Fannie was indeed dead—murdered—and in the agony of his soul he would groan aloud, almost praying for death that he might be reunited to her, in spirit if not in life.

Campbell was aroused from one of these fits of gloomy despondency by a low, taunting laugh sounding from close beside him, and hastily glancing up, he perceived that the old man had taken Lola's position. The almost diabolical expression of triumph that rested upon his face, startled the young hunter, and he resolved to give his enemy no more such glee-filled moments.

"Who are you that my misery should give you so much pleasure?" he demanded, with ill-concealed curiosity.

"I promised to tell you—and this is as good a time as any to keep my word," slowly replied the old man, sinking down upon the rude stool that had been so recently occupied by a much more agreeable figure. "You may or you may not remember something of the matter, when I tell you that my name is Albert Mestayer."

As he spoke, his gaze was riveted firmly upon the young man's countenance. Though expressing curiosity, there was no change to indicate that Campbell had ever heard of the name before.

"I see you do not know—I might have known that they would never have told you. It is well. You will not be so prejudiced, and will be more likely to do me justice. Now

listen well, and you will see why I hate your family and that of Hawksley.

"We three were close neighbors living then in the southern part of Illinois. Almost from childhood we had been playmates and bosom friends. And such we might have remained to this day, only for the treachery of one—of Christopher Hawksley, the brother of Archibald.

"We three men married, but he—Chris—was single. Though living with his brother, he was quite as much at home while at your father's house, or at mine. Indeed the gossips began to whisper that he was more so, and to point the finger of scorn at me.

"For a time I closed my ears to these rumors, but at my heart there gnawed a horrible fear that what I dreaded was but too well founded. He and she had long been intimate, and at one time were reported betrothed, but then a coldness came between them, and she accepted me. You see, young man, I am frank with you," and Mestayer smiled bitterly. "I mean to tell you all—both for and against myself.

"I spoke to her of the rumors, but she was of a quick, passionate temper, and for the first time since marriage we had hot and angry words together. She refused to answer me, saying that I insulted her by the suspicion. While still angry, I met Christopher Hawksley and forbid him ever entering my house, or addressing my wife at any time or place where they might chance to meet.

"He seemed surprised—I thought then that he looked guilty, and I could scarcely keep my hands from his throat. But I did, and went home with a heart still more bitter and wicked.

"Three days after this, as I returned from the field somewhat earlier than usual, I saw Hawksley parting from my wife at the door. They seemed frightened and confused at my appearance, and I dare say they had cause.

"The next I remember is finding myself standing over his quivering and senseless body, my hands covered with blood, my wife crying for me to have mercy—not to stain my soul with murder. I had not killed because I had no weapons with me, I suppose. But I had beaten him almost to death with my naked fists.

“ Well, the word soon spread that I had brutally murdered the man, and the excitement was great. Hawksley was one of those general favorites, half-fool, half-rogue, who spent his money with a lavish hand, making friends with everybody, while I, naturally reserved, had become morose and unsociable since these sickening rumors began to meet my ear. So you see it took very little to get up a hue and cry against me.

“ Arch. Hawksley came and removed his brother. That night, **though** the doctors pronounced Chris. in no immediate danger, ~~a mob~~ led by those who had once been my dearest friends—~~my~~ father and Arch. Hawksley—came and took me from my bed, dragging me out-doors amid curses and threats, some even beating me with clubs and their fists as I was hauled helplessly along over the rough ground, half naked, only in my night-clothes.

“ Well, you can guess the rest. The favorite punishment of western mobs, when they do not wish to *quite* murder, was given me. I was tarred and feathered! And for what? I have told you. You can judge whether I deserved it or not. And, mind you, *your* father and Archibald Hawksley were the leaders in the movement. By *their* orders the others acted. Do you wonder that I promised never to forgive them?

“ After this, they set me free. Half mad I plunged into the swampy woods, where I lay until morning. By that time I had in a manner regained my coolness, and had decided upon my course of action. I knew that I had one true friend near me, and to his hut I hastened. This was a middle-aged negro. I had won him from his master half a dozen years before, on a Mississippi steamboat, playing cards. It was the planter's last stake, and I could not refuse. When I gave Sam his choice, he elected to go with me. At the end of my trip I gave him his freedom, and he now lived on a piece of my land.

“ He removed the tar, and tenderly nursed me through a long and severe illness, brought on by exposure and excitement. During all this he had kept my existence a secret, and all believed that I had thrown myself in the river to hide my shame. Sam also kept close watch upon my house, and

when he considered me strong enough, he told me what he had learned.

"My wife took my death very easily, it seemed. Chris. Hawksley had been seen visiting her. That was enough. I swore then that I would have a deep and bitter revenge—that I would devote my entire life to that end.

"Sam was true to me, body and soul. What I said was law. He aided me in my scheme, by procuring me weapons, clothes and such articles as I needed. Then I watched my chance. It soon came.

"Sam brought me the word. Christopher Hawksley was at my house. I hastened there, cool and calm as I am now, though I had resolved that they both should die that night.

"I kept my oath. They were together in my wife's room. They never left it alive. I shot him, and entered the room. The woman who had been my wife, fell upon her knees and begged for mercy, swearing that she was innocent. But I knew that she lied. I had seen too much.

"I raised my hand and struck her. She fell forward bathed in blood. I did not know that I had a knife in my hand, until I saw that.

"His death only inspired me with a ferocious joy. I gloried in my act of vengeance. But when I saw her lying there, gasping out her life, I changed. I had loved her so tenderly and true, until she fell from me. I had idolized her almost. And yet—I had killed her!"

The old man choked and paused. Campbell, pale and horror-stricken, did not speak. Then Mestayer, with an effort, resumed, his head bowed upon his hands, his voice sounding like that of one talking in a dream.

"How long I remained there I do not know, but it must have been for hours. The alarm was given by some one who had heard the shot and investigated it. The neighbors came and found me sitting there, *her* head upon my breast, her form clasped tight to my heart. Despite this they knew that I was the murderer. My revolver lay there, with one chamber discharged, as the blue gas around the tube showed, recently. My knife—with initials carved upon the horn handle—was beside me, covered with blood.

"They say that I acted like a madman when they tried to re-

move her body. But numbers prevailed, and I was bound. The next I remember I was in the county jail, tried and condemned to death. But trusty Sam didn't fail me.

"He set me free—I have not patience now to tell all that he had to do, but he was at work for three nights before I was set free. Then, just as I mounted the horse he had brought for my use, we were discovered. Sam struck the horse a heavy blow that maddened it, and I was saved, though I tried to turn and aid him.

"Yes, he—the simple, unlearned negro—he saved me, at the cost of his own life. He was shot, but he kept the guards engaged until I was beyond their reach. Thus I lost my only friend.

"I had only one thing to live for—*revenge*. I swore to devote my life to that one end—and I have not yet forgotten my oath. For a time I kept in hiding, but then I set to work. *You* are the first one that knows for a certainty how your father died. *I shot him.*"

Campbell uttered a hoarse cry, and strove to arise, his eyes blazing with horror and vengeance. But the strong cords restrained his fury.

"And why—what had he done to you?"

"I have told you. Besides, I swore that I would destroy the entire race of the Hawksleys and Campbells. Boy, my wife was your father's sister."

Campbell listened in astonishment. Until now he had believed his father had been an only child. But there was something in the old man's tones that told him he was speaking the truth.

"I am telling you the truth, though you seem to doubt it. But that matters little. I need only tell you a little more. After I killed your father, I had to hide again. I fled to New Orleans. While there, I met a Spanish creole and married her. Had she lived, I might have reformed, for I loved her with all my hot, fiery nature. But she died, leaving me one babe—you have seen her here—Lola.

"For a time I lived in retirement, caring only for my child, teaching her, as she grew older, to hate all mankind but her father. I succeeded, as I thought. Then I left her at school, and set forth to strike another blow. I found my

enemies gone. they had removed, and I feared to inquire of those who could have told me where, lest I should be recognized.

"For years I hunted you—you and the Hawksleys. I did not find you until this spring. By chance I found this retreat, and fitted it up for use. Then I brought Lola here. You remember the excitement that she caused, as the strange rider—a better name would have been *decoy*, for that was her duty. I first gained her good views of those I hated—just how does not matter now.

"Her first success was in luring Fred Hawksley here. Then I stole away his sister—your betrothed, as you say. *You* came next. After you will come your sister Mary Colton. Then the rest of the Hawksleys. Before forty-eight hours roll by, all of those included in my vow of vengeance will be dead—*dead*, do you hear?" hissed Westmayer, in a low, malignant tone of voice.

"But Fannie—you have not—"

"It matters little to *you* whether she be dead or not. If not, she will be, soon. So will you. But I need the fresh air. I leave you to think of what I have told you, and to compose your mind for what is to come. If you sleep, pleasant dreams—ha! ha!" and laughing malignantly, the monomaniac left the chamber.

The conflicting emotions that racked Campbell's mind on hearing this strange disclosure, can scarcely be imagined—most certainly not described. Besides clearing up the mystery that had enshrouded his father's murder, it also revealed to him the full peril that threatened his own as well as the lives of his friends.

So deeply buried was he in thought that he did not hear the soft footfall nor the faint rustle as Lola seated herself beside him. Her large, dark eyes were filled with a gentle light foreign to her fiery, passionate nature, and her cheek glowed with the swift flow of blood.

As Campbell, aroused by that strange consciousness one feels when being fixedly gazed upon, raised his eyes, his face darkened with a frown. In a harsh tone he uttered:

"Well, I am waiting—proceed. Of course you come here to tell me some frightful story of how I have wronged you,

possibly through my great-grandchildren, or something of that sort, and that you have sworn deadly vengeance against me and mine. Proceed—but for pity's sake, cut it short."

"You wrong me, Mr. Campbell," and Lola's voice sounded low and soft. "I am no enemy of yours—I would be your friend, if you would permit."

"My friend—and *his* daughter?"

"I often think that I am *not* his daughter—that he is mad—a monomaniac, who does not know what he does or says. I overheard what he told you, for I feared that he meant to kill you, and I resolved to prevent that, if it cost my own life. It is the same story, almost word for word, that he has told me scores of times. But—whether that is true or not—I am not your enemy, since seeing you. Before, I hated you, because he taught me to do so. He made me believe that all men were evil, treacherous beings, but—I don't think *you* are," and Lola drooped her eyes before the steady gaze of the young hunter.

"What is your object in telling me this?" he asked, slowly.

"To prove to you that I am a friend, not an enemy, as you seemed to regard me."

"*Will* you prove this? You can, if you wish. Will you do it?" added Campbell, with ill-suppressed eagerness.

"How can I?" softly, with a quick glance at him.

"Easily. Unloosen these cords, restore my weapons, and I will believe that you are a true, earnest friend."

"So that you might kill my father?"

"No. I would not harm him unless he first attacked me. Then I would defend myself."

"He would kill me!"

"With me you would be safe. I will take you to any point you wish, or, if you would rather, my mother will welcome you to her home."

Their gaze met, but only for a moment, then the eyes of the strange girl sunk, and a low sigh fluttered her lips. The face of the young hunter, though open and earnest, had not told her the tale she wished and hoped to hear.

"You asked my father about your friends. He gave you to understand that they were dead. One of them still lives."

"What—Fannie—" eagerly began Ned, his dark eyes gleaming.

"No—the young man," and Lola's face turned a shade paler.

"Merciful God !" groaned Campbell, quivering with intense heart-agony.

"Then it is true, as you told father—you loved this girl?"

"Better than my life ! And now—but no—you are only trying me," he added, looking up imploringly. "Tell me she is still living?"

"Why should I lie to you? She is dead—but her blood is not on his hands. He fought to save her, but one of the men shot her, as he was bringing her here. The other—your friend, still lives, though badly wounded. Could I believe in your gratitude, I would set both yourself and him free."

"You crush all my hopes, then taunt me with freedom—I have nothing to live for now," bitterly replied Ned.

"Your mother?"

"True, I forgot for a moment. Well, speak plain. What pledge do you require? What do you wish me to do?" he added, wearily.

"Make me a solemn promise—pledge me your honor as a gentleman to make me your—your wife, and I will free you both."

"What !"

"Let me finish. I know that my words seem strange, unlady-like, if you will, but consider what my past life has been. And yet, I have only obeyed my father. I have never sinned of my own free will. He thinks me all ice, but I can love, I *do* love ; I have loved with all my soul ever since you came here. Now you know my heart. To win your love I am willing to disown father—all else."

"I have no love to give you. It was all *hers*—my poor, lost Fannie's," muttered Ned, yet strongly affected by the passionate, yet pleading tones of the strange girl.

"You will in time—I do not ask nor expect it all at once. I will love you so tenderly and wholly that you *must* return it, in time."

"If you loved me as you say, you would free me and trust to my gratitude for your reward."

"And thus lose you forever? No—no! I would rather, far rather kill you here, then take my own life, than to run that risk," cried Lola, her eyes flaming.

A strong temptation was upon him. Why not dissimulate,—or even give a positive pledge, if by these means he could gain freedom?

"Wait—I must think of this a little. I can not answer you now," he said, at length.

"You must be quick, for there's no time to lose. Father will soon return. And he is looking for his messenger, sent to bring a band of savages here. They intend attacking the settlements, when your mother, sister, and the Hawksley family will be captured. Decide quickly, and you may be in time to save them."

CHAPTER X.

THE CLEW

THOUGH Chigilli, the Kiowa chief, had acted so promptly in dispatching a runner for reinforcements, that fact was likely to avail him little, for the movements of the settlers were prompt and decided. The outlaw, James Mestayer, was the cause of this.

First, Jack Colton had recognized him, and now, recovered from the effects of his fall, was eager to attack them. Then Archibald Hawksley, in the confused struggle, believed that in him he saw the abductor of his daughter.

Though it was Albert Mestayer who performed that deed, his disguise had made him look like a much younger man, and there was a family resemblance between the uncle and nephew, so that Hawksley's mistake was natural.

A plan of attack, bold and daring, was quickly arranged.

"Jack Colton, you will take one-half of the men, and I'll lead the others," hurriedly commanded Hawksley. "You go to the right and gain the foot of the hill. Then when I give the signal, close in. But remember, the white man must be taken *alive*."

Separating, the two parties rode up to the hill base, then dismounting, drew their revolvers, ready for work. At the

signal they glided rapidly along, and soon reached the defile before a shot was fired.

Then ensued a scene of frightful confusion. It was not a fight that can be drawn in words, for each man fought on his own hook, singling out his foe with eyes for naught else.

Though brief, it was bloody in the extreme. For a few moments the Kiowas fought bravely, but then the rapid detonation of the white men's revolvers proved too much for their courage, and the survivors fled up the hollow, only to encounter another foe.

Zeb Ruel and his two companions, Fenton and Morley, being out of sight of their comrades below, knew nothing of their movements until the sound of firearms, together with vengeful shouts and shrill cries, announced the commencement of the struggle. Divining the truth, they began descending the ridge side, in order to assist their comrades.

Though too late to take part in the struggle proper, the fleeing red-skins ran headlong against their weapons. Three rifle-cracks, and only two Kiowas remained, standing bewildered by this new and unexpected danger. Then, amidst a storm of revolver bullets, they tried to scale the steep hill, but ere half-way to its top, the last Kiowa flung aloft his arms, and rolled back to the base, dead.

Mestayer had fought bravely, but his time had come. Both Colton and Hawksley assailed him. Colton fell, with a bullet through his breast, but before the outlaw could do more, Hawksley was upon him.

In the desperate struggle that ensued, his wounds aided in giving the settler the victory, and ere the last reports echoed from up the valley, Mestayer was securely bound, a prisoner.

"Who is't ye've got, Hawksley?" cried Zeb Ruel, coming up at this moment. "Hellow, Jap Morton, as I'm a sinner!"

"The man that carried off Fannie, I believe," but the settler hesitated as he now for the first time took a good square look at his captive.

"I never stole her—I know nothing about the matter," sullenly replied Mestayer, his eyes drooping.

"You lie, villain!" snarled Hawksley, springing upon the prostrate figure. "Tell me—tell me quick, or I'll choke the vile life out of your carcass!"

"Easy — easy, neighbor," quoth Ruel, as he dragged the infuriated settler from his victim. "A feller cain't easy speak when his thrapple is shet tight in a vise. Leave the or'nery cuss to me. I'll bring him round, I reckon. D' y' hear, Jap Morton?—best tell me what ye know."

"I'll tell you all I know. It's not much, but it'll show you that I had no hand in the matter. An old man named Albert Mestayer, in disguise, deceived you and stole your daughter."

"You're lying now!"

"I'm not—it's the truth. You may not believe it, for the report was spread long ago that he was dead. Have you forgotten the man who killed your brother, Christopher Hawksley?"

The settler staggered back as though dealt a deadly blow. He had not recognized the name at first, so many years had passed by since those dark days. Seeing his agitation, Ruel took up the examination.

"What 'd he steal her fer?"

"Revenge. Hawksley knows for what."

"I do—go on," faintly muttered the settler.

"He was met, on his return, by three men—part of those who—who burned Colton's house. They, in the dim light, thought it was me, and they believed that I had betrayed them in that matter. There was a fight, in which the old man shot two, when the other made off. His horse had been hurt, and so was the girl. She was shot in the side. If you followed his trail, you must have lost it in the river. He rode there, and seeing that his horse was nearly dead, he shot him and sent it floating down-stream, to cover his trail. Then he waded up-stream, finally reaching his retreat."

"Where is that?"

"In the *baranca* that cuts through the ten-mile prairie. In the east side is concealed a good-sized cave. He lives there."

"And the gal?" asked Ruel, in answer to a sign from the agitated father.

"I don't know whether she is living or not. Mestayer told me that she was fatally wounded."

"A durned lie—don't yer b'lieve him, neighbor," splurged

Ruel, as Hawksley sunk to the ground with a bitter groan. "Now, what of Fred Hawksley? An' who is that gal that he rid a'ter?"

"Mestayer's daughter. He is hidden there, but he is crazy. The old man hit him on the head with a club, and injured his brain."

"Ask him about Ned," suggested Fenton.

"If you mean Ned Campbell, he's there, too," quickly replied Mestayer.

"Ge-long to thunderation! A hull nestfull—any more?" spluttered Ruel, amazed.

"No," then adding, quickly. "Now I have told you all, you will set me free?"

"Not much—sca'cely. How d' we know but it's all a pesky lie, jist hatched up as you went along? No, sir; your part o' the barg'in don't end ontel a'ter you show us this wonderful hole in the ground, an' we see how matters railly stan'."

"Come," said Hawksley, in a strained, unnaturally still voice, "we are losing time here; let us be riding."

"Co-rect. Git yer horses, boys. I'll ketch one fer this chap. He's got to show us the hole, or I'll know the why."

Mestayer was mounted upon one of the spare horses, and tied firmly to the saddle. Ruel rode beside him, while Hawksley led the way at a rapid rate.

The ten miles were soon covered, and the party found themselves at the *baranca*. Dismounting, they silently approached the spot indicated by Mestayer.

CHAPTER XI.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

FOR a time Ned Campbell remained silent, deep-buried in thought. The temptation was strong, and he was slowly yielding to it.

Lola watched him closely, and as her keen eye, sharpened by love the most intense and passionate, read the quick changes of his handsome countenance, her heart beat high

with hope that he was about to consent. The inward conflict sickened her, and she staggered like one drunken, as she rose, muttering, in a husky, unnatural voice :

“Think well over it, but decide quickly. There is no time to lose, if you would be saved. I must seek the fresh air—I am choking !”

Campbell watched her until her form disappeared, then his eyes drooped, and he tried to think connectedly over what he had heard both from father and from daughter.

It did not take him long to decide. Though he felt that he could never bring himself to love, or even respect as a friend, the child of the man who had boasted that his hands were stained with blood—and together with other, the blood of the young man’s father, he resolved to accept her terms in seeming, until he was free.

The thought of his mother’s peril brought him to this decision. He could not let her be murdered, when a simple falsehood would save her.

He had scarcely arrived at this determination when Lola hastily entered, her countenance flushed, her eyes glowing.

“Quick ! your answer—my father is coming !” she hurriedly uttered, reaching his side.

“I consent—provided you assist me in freeing Fred, also.”

“I will—you shall never regret your choice, if my love can repay you. But now—there’s his step. Pretend to sleep, as he may suspect something,” she hastily added, as with burning lips she gently touched his forehead.

Though strongly agitated, Campbell managed to quiet his nerves in seeming, and as Mestayer entered, his suspicious glance saw only a sleeping captive and a drowsy sentinel, her head bowed upon her breast. It was evident that he had met or seen something that greatly excited him, and pleasingly, too, for a triumphant glow irradiated his face, and his dark eyes sparkled with strange brilliancy.

“Lola, you may go now and lie down. You must be sleepy.”

Lola arose and retired, though with reluctance. She seemed ill at ease, and to suspect danger to the one she had so suddenly given her heart, in the ill-suppressed excitement of the old man. One hand sought the pistol at her waist, and

she crouched down in the passage, listening intently, ready to interfere should her fears prove well founded.

Mestayer touched Campbell lightly upon the shoulder, then laughed aloud at the air of well dissimulated surprise worn by his face as the young man opened his eyes with a start.

"A change in your watcher, you see, and I suppose you think a disagreeable one. You sleep sound, young man. That is a blessing, if you only think so. But that reminds me—I have something to tell you concerning your friends."

"Who—what?" stammered Ned, really surprised.

"Of Hawksley, Ruel and the others who were with you when you were hunting for the girl. They have apparently become alarmed at your long absence, and have been trailing you."

"If so, I don't see why *you* should laugh."

"Because you don't know all. You remember where you left your horse? Well, I sent a friend—one whom you may have known as Jasper Morton—I sent him *on your horse* to hasten up my friends. *Now* do you see? They—*your* friends, have traced your trail out several miles beyond this, and are camping there, intending to follow on in the morning. *Now* do you see why I laugh?"

"No."

"Bah! you are dull—very stupid. Well then, I am sworn brother to Chigilli, the Kiowa chief. He is waiting for me to send him word when all is in readiness for him to strike a blow at the settlement. My nephew is to bring them on—seventy-five strong. He has my instructions to follow back his trail—and to kill or capture all who may be upon it. This is why I laughed. I have just been scouting round them, so close that I could have picked off any one of their number, had that been my wish. But I have a different fate in store for Hawksley—the rest I care not for. Now then, you have something more to ponder over. You should thank me for keeping your mind from rusting—but I have long since ceased to look for gratitude from those of my race. Ha! ha!"

Campbell did not reply, and the old man sunk into a reverie that lasted for hours. At length he was aroused by

Lola, who told him that day was dawning. The old man arose and emerged from the chamber, while after a quiet greeting to Ned, Lola busied herself with preparations for the morning meal.

For an hour after sunrise, Mestayer watched at the edge of the *baranca*, yet so close to the den that Lola could not put her resolve of freeing Campbell into execution, without the certainty of a deadly collision between him and her father, an extremity that she could not as yet bring herself to brave. But she regretted not having done so, when Mestayer reappeared and bade her bring forth her pony.

As she reluctantly obeyed, Campbell saw that the horses were kept concealed in an apartment of the cave. Mestayer spoke decisively, and Lola dared not disobey.

"You will ride out along the trail that I told you of, and see if you can see any thing of our friends. Do not go beyond the creek, but wait there, if needs be, for half an hour. If you do not see them then, hasten back."

Lola emerged from the *baranca* and dashed away over the prairie with lightning speed. Mestayer resumed his position as look-out, his eyes eagerly following the swiftly flying figure of his daughter.

Campbell had read aright the quick glance thrown at him by Lola. She feared that she could not effect his release until too late. His heart sunk within him, and he closed his eyes in deep and troubled reflection.

However, he was to be aroused ere long. A low, faint rustle came from beyond, and then a figure appeared at the angle behind which Campbell had frequently observed Mestayer disappear.

A face that bore an excited yet troubled look; pale and worn, yet very beautiful. The large, wild-looking eyes rested upon the form of the young hunter as he lay upon the couch, and the lips parted, the arms outstretched, as, with a low cry, the figure glided forward.

In amazement Campbell raised his eyes. Then a low, glad cry broke from his lips as he recognized in the figure that of his dearly beloved one, Fannie Hawksley. He tried to outstretch his arms, but the attempt recalled his situation.

"Ned—thank God! I am in time!" gasped the maiden,

dropping upon her knees beside the pallet. "Think what I must have suffered. I have heard every thing that was said here. I heard the lies they told you, and had no power to deny them, for I was bound hand and foot and gagged."

As she spoke, Fannie with trembling fingers strove to release her lover, but the hard-knotted cords resisted her efforts.

"Fannie, my poor darling, you can do no good without a knife. There must be some lying in the outer room—those we used for breakfast. You will not be afraid to look?"

"Not when it is for you," she bravely returned, and gliding through the passage, she quickly secured what she sought, together with a brace of pistols that she had snatched from the table.

"My precious darling!" murmured Campbell, as the cords yielded to the keen weapon, and springing to his feet he clasped Fannie to his wildly throbbing heart; but fortunately she was the more composed of the two.

"Take the pistols, Ned. You may need them. Now—we have no time to lose. Come—you must help me set Fred free. He is kept a prisoner in here, too. Hasten—"

"Too late! Back, Fannie—get behind me," hastily muttered Campbell, as the echo of a quick step came to their ears from the outer chamber.

A simultaneous cry followed the appearance of the figure, and Campbell's pistol muzzle slightly fell as he saw it covered the heart of the strange girl, Lola Mestayer.

"You free?" she cried, in amazement; "but come—there's no time to lose. You must meet my father, but it is the only chance. The Indians are coming up like the wind. You can hide in—my God! who is that?" she abruptly added, for the first time observing the shrinking figure of Fannie.

"My promised wife—the one you so falsely swore was dead," sternly replied Campbell.

"It was for love of you that I lied—but I will make my words good!" hissed the maddened girl, as her bright pistol was leveled toward Fannie.

The report followed swiftly, but the low exclamation that broke the air came not from the maiden's lips. Campbell had sprung before his love, himself receiving the bullet. His left arm swung helpless at his side.

"Forgive me—oh, forgive me!" cried Lola, as she observed the effect of her mad act. "I would rather that bullet had pierced my heart than to harm *you*!"

A hoarse cry came echoing from without. The three inmates of the chamber experienced a thrill as they divined its purport. Mestayer had heard the confusion, and was coming to investigate it.

Two clicks sounded through the chamber. Campbell cocked his pistols. So did Lola. The eyes of all were turned toward the entrance. They had not long to wait, for the next moment Mestayer burst into the chamber, his eyes ablaze, his hand clutching a revolver.

"What is this—who set you free?" he cried, hoarsely, as he noticed Campbell standing erect, pale but defiant. "Ha! *you* did—traitress!" and his pistol covered Lola's heart.

"No—I did it," tremblingly cried Fannie, as she saw the peril of one innocent.

"You too!" for the first time noticing the maiden. "Fortunately I am prepared for it. Now, sir," he added, in a cold, deadly tone. "Drop your pistol, or I shoot you down like a dog."

"Two can play at that game. Stand aside and let us pass," uttered Campbell, as with a rapid motion he raised his pistol to a level.

"Bah! If I should, what better would you be by it? My friends are by this time at the *baranca*. They would stop you if I did not."

"Father, let them go free. Those coming without are *their* friends, not yours. They are white men—the settlers who were on his trail," and Lola glided forward.

"Traitor! but I'll not be balked entirely—I'll strike one blow before I die!"

His pistol spoke, and the bullet claimed a victim. But not the one at whose life he had aimed. Lola sprung forward, shielding with her body the life of the man whom she so madly loved.

With a groan of agony she sunk down upon the blood-sprinkled floor, her young life going out as she gasped a name—the name of him she had saved from death.

With a howl of fury, Campbell fired twice in quick succes-

sion, but the last shot was superfluous. The murderer of his father was dead—shot through the brain.

Staggering back against the wall, faint and weak, Campbell cocked his pistol. From without there came loud, excited cries, and he had not understood the speech of Lola. He believed them also enemies. But then as he recognized the foremost, Archibald Hawksley and Zeb Ruel, he muttered a thanksgiving and fainted.

But little more need be added, for the meeting and little explanations may be left to the reader's imagination. Fred Hawksley was found, bound and gagged, but unhurt save from the blow given him by Mestayer when the strange decoy had lured him to the den. In a week he was as well as ever.

Campbell had only fainted from loss of blood, and was soon restored. The wound Fannie had received in the fight on the prairie was slight, and already nearly healed.

As the party left the cave, it was found that James Mestayer had disappeared, but two days afterward he was found. Fearing death he had urged his horse to break its fastenings, though he himself was still firmly bound. In the mad gallop that ensued, his saddle turned, and he, falling beneath the mustang's belly, had met his death.

The Kiowas, awed by the death of their chief, quietly retreated to their hunting-grounds, and the threatened Indian war blew over.

Of course Ned and Fannie were married, now that Fred was found, and equally of course, Zeb Ruel and the rest of the young hunters were gay and welcome guests.

Albert Mestayer and his ill-fated daughter, Lola, were interred in one grave upon the banks of the *Baranca*. But their strange story did not die for many a year, and is still occasionally alluded to, in the section.

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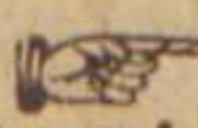
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